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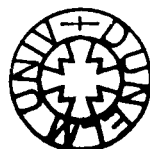
# **Starting to Entrepreneur: Processes of becoming self-employed**

**Jillian Wendy Tidmarsh**

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**Department of Sociology and Social Policy**  
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**24 MAY 2002**

## **Abstract**

### **Starting to Entrepreneur: Processes of becoming self-employed**

This thesis is based upon research conducted in the North East of England during the years 1996 to 1998. It is about what it has been like for some "entrepreneurial" actors to become self employed. The interest originated in the author's own experience of self-employment. Her memories contrast with what it was like to be a student of sociology, giving rise to questions which drove her back into the field of self-employment, this time as a - sometimes - participant observer.

The thesis begins with an overview of the sociological and business schools' literature about small to medium sized enterprises and entrepreneurs. This provides the reader with the context in which self-employment tends to be understood, and the context in which self-employed actors produce their self-employment. In the data chapters, the self-employed actors are introduced in terms of their context, as entered into and explored by the author. Biography is important in these chapters, as our understanding of the processes of becoming and doing self-employment are enlarged.

The author's way of understanding the processes involved in developing a self-employed self and doing self-employment is to treat the project as located in a liminal and underconstructed part of a socially constructed world. Using frame analysis, the author asserts that self-employment requires greater constructive efforts on the part of the actor, and a greater sensitivity - a heightened consciousness - throughout the business development stage. There is not always a readily apprehensible work context available to the self-employed actor, or pre-determined role for them to adopt or emulate. Furthermore in the struggle to set up ways of being and doing self-employment, the actor is often not at liberty to drop all other roles and obligations. In sum, there is little about entrepreneuring that may be taken for granted.

## Thank You

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In memory of Dad



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I declare that this thesis is resubmitted in a revised form, having been submitted for the degree of PhD in 2000. None of the material has been submitted in any other university for a degree.

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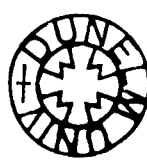
## Chapter One, The Thesis and the Literature

### **Introduction**

This thesis is an account of my research into what it is like to be developing a business as a self-employed person. Its origin stems from my own experiences as self-employed. I had a standpoint of sorts, in that sociological literature about work that I came across as an undergraduate seldom took account of self-employed workers, and when it did, they were described as the petit bourgeoisie, capitalists, owners of the means of production. The working conditions of these groups were not subject to much description, but in contrast the working conditions of those portrayed as at the other end of the spectrum, the proletariat, were described at length.

My working conditions were probably no better or worse than those of others; they were just different, largely unknown and easily misunderstood; as an owner of my means of production I had an old sewing machine and an iron. I wasn't a high flying entrepreneur, but I did timidly get on the telephone to try to get orders for my work, and never ceased to be surprised that people seemed to like what I did for them.

It seemed to me that working for oneself required a different way of working, a different way of being in the world from that in which one worked for others. This is what the thesis asks, and then if this is so, if working for oneself is different, what are the processes of transition, are these changes to a different way of being intended, and what do they feel like? The literature didn't answer these questions for me, experiences of self-employment have not been addressed in this way by business school or sociological writings about work. So this thesis is a quite personal



endeavour to bring the trials and tribulations of those becoming self-employed to the attention of a wider audience. Through thinking sociologically, it develops into a work which explains the strategies and processes through which the self-employed bring themselves and their businesses into being.

My theory as I write up the research is that there is more to becoming self-employed than may at first be apparent. The process of becoming self-employed is not simply a matter of acquiring the skills and wherewithall to set up in business. It's not about plugging Bell's (1975) Black and Deckers into the grey economy of the 1970s. The process of becoming self-employed involves the development of self as self-employed. And how actors go about developing this self is an integral part of becoming self-employed. They come to manage their spaces, places, times and tools, and must also come to manage themselves and think of themselves as self-employed.

This chapter begins the thesis by reviewing academic accounts about work and small business. I include literature from the business schools as well as sociological writing which concerns itself with work and self-employment. However, it is not designed to be an exhaustive account, rather to link the view from the business schools with that from sociology, whilst bringing the reader to an understanding of the concerns of this thesis. It is quite difficult to do this without wanting to go into depth about *work* as a phenomena yet this has been done already many times, particularly in the sociological literature, see recent examples such as Grint (1991) and Brown (1997). In recent studies of new ways of working both sociological and business school perspectives have extended their

interest in work under headings of occupation, profession, employment or entrepreneurship in a more particularised way.

Two accounts of work which resonated with the problems encountered in this thesis, were the Pahl (1984) account of ways of getting by on the Isle of Sheppey and MacDonald and Coffield's (1991) account of youth and enterprise. In both these accounts I felt a resonance with my own experiences of self-employment, and felt that the authors were telling it like it is, warts and all. Looking at the business schools' literature I felt that such warts were glossed over in a number of studies in which the structural and economic components of small business, and quantitative accounts of successes and failures, obscured our view and disallowed empathy with the subjects.

The inclusion of works which consider the entrepreneur or entrepreneurship was a scratching of an itch for me really. I felt that the term if misused or left unexamined would possibly invite preconceptions from readers - preconceptions held by many of the actors in the study in any case. The literature from the Chicago school gave me a greater confidence to "tell the story like it is", and supported my way of wishing to value the actor but also be reflective about wider contexts. I feel it is necessary to locate work and ways of understanding it in a wider context today. So not wishing to stick rigidly with writings about self-employment I have drawn from wider sources, and, lastly in this chapter, I draw upon studies which consider the freelancer and homeworker. The issues which these studies raise, of family interactions and commitments, balancing obligations and staying in touch with work colleagues and so on, are just as relevant for those who are self-employed and help rather than hinder our understandings.



Two points in this thesis are significant about our changing ways of working . Firstly that we may easily find ourselves self-employed for a period of time, self-employment is no longer the domain of a petit bourgeoisie, it's merely a way of working up there on the shelf with all the other ways of working we may choose. Secondly, however, it's not such an easy option to pick up and put down. The boundaries between work and leisure become far less clear cut, not because an employer is managing one's heart (Hochschild, 1983), demanding one's soul (du Gay, 1996) or commandeering one's mind (Casey, 1995), but because one is employing one's self in one's own space and time.

### **The scope of the literature**

Against a backdrop of changing ways of working at the end of the twentieth century self-employment has attracted attention from a number of quarters. Broadly there are those for whom a concern with self-employment stems from a concern with business in the western world and small to medium enterprises in the UK in particular. There are those who are concerned with the family business and its workings (Baines and Wheelock, 1998) as a prevailing phenomena in the face of change, and much has been learned through studies of ethnic business enterprises (Ram, 1998). There is now an increasing interest in the fortunes of women at work (Hakim, 1988; Rees, 1992) and so also their fortunes in work and businesses of their own (Carter and Cannon, 1992). Related to this interest is the focus upon the 'electronic cottage' (Baines, 1999), freelancing, and home working (Phizackea and Wolkowitz, 1995). In addition there is a - hardly very new - interest in the entrepreneur and, harnessing the idea of entrepreneur as hero (Kanter, 1990), a number of the perspectives noted above locate their concerns in the shadow of an

'enterprise culture' (Heelas and Morris, 1992 and Keat and Abercrombie, 1991).

Burrows and Curran (1989) set out to bring a sociological expertise to the understanding of small businesses, and see, for example, Atkin et al (1993), whose concern is with the range of disciplinary perspectives which may be employed, quantitatively and qualitatively in the pursuit of understanding small business. This reflection in the business schools has brought about in recent years some rich ethnographies (Ram, 1998) which have brought to light, described and given voice to, the day to day activities of those making do, getting by, and getting on (Jurik, 1998; McCrone, 1994) in their own businesses. Cross fertilization between the disciplines has seen much recourse to sociological perspectives and methods, see for example Ritchie's (1991) use of frame analysis, and Scase and Goffee's (1987) work which allows and perhaps even legitimises descriptive data in the small business schools. The more reflexive studies (Carter and Cannon, 1992; Ram, 1998) bring with them a more clearly acknowledged and articulated link between academia and its 'subjects', and the recognition that we take much as academics from our field of study and should return to it what we can (Ram, 1999). But methodological angst in the business school has not, despite rich descriptive data, provided us with an empathetic understanding of the person doing business, let alone the becoming business person, but rather given us a compendium of the business of doing business.

There is little literature from any discipline that takes as its topic of enquiry the self-employed person *sui generis*, let alone those in their very first few years of becoming self-employed. Where young businesses are referred

to they are called 'start ups', and draw attention from the business school literature for success and failure rates, the effectiveness of support agencies for example, and from those looking at the Enterprise Agency in the face of an enterprise culture such as MacDonald and Coffield (1991) MacDonald (1996 and 1997) and Rouse (1998). So the literature which best sets the scene in the following section presents a wider range of ways of working as a backcloth to the deeper concerns in this thesis.

### **Business School literature**

As research into small businesses increased Gibb (1996) wrote an article asking what indeed a small business was. He pointed to the taken for granted assumptions about business which overlooked what actually goes on between owner manager, customer and advisor on a day to day basis, and the stress was on the day as being at least twenty four hours long. Gibb presented us with a picture of the owner manager as someone who was a jack of all trades, able to turn their hand to anything at the drop of a hat, and be available for clients, customers or crises at all hours of the day or night. But also someone who, at the centre of his or her own network, delegated to specialists; the accountant, the solicitor, the technician and so on, when the need arose. Gibb was pointing out that small business won't look or feel like big business. The hours are different and the division of labour hardly present at all. Indeed it was really impossible for there to be any cohesive meaning to the term 'small business' as procedures and practices varied too considerably for classification and, besides, the term couldn't do justice to what was really going on 'out there'.

A concern with what was really going on out there was spreading and had given rise to a flurry of publications (Burrows, 1991; Burrows and Curran,

1989; Storey, 1994; Scase and Goffee, 1987) all emphasising that it was important to get underneath the skin of small business. An increasing concern for the small business person as social agent gave rise to class, status and income related themes (Curran and Burrows, 1986) and the invitation to sociologists to take up the challenge too (Curran and Burrows, 1986 and Burrows and Curran, 1989). Burrows and Curran were eager that sociologists take seriously "small scale capitalism in industrial societies" (1986:265) and directed us towards a sociology of petit capitalism which would combine class analysis, entrepreneurship, the social relations of enterprise and capital's link with society. Assessing the lie of the land at the end of the 1980s they came back with observations about the diversity of small business activities, not least that a vast number were in service rather than production sector work. From these observations they suggested that a move to more qualitative research would yield more fruitful data. Meanwhile Ritchie (1986) was exploring Frame Analysis and a dramaturgical model to make sense of the complexities of the enterprise culture for small business. Business schools' findings began to employ the narrative of owner managers and/or the self-employed. Interpretation was scarce but the words lay before the reader a frank portrayal of a way of work without safety nets, sick pay, paid holidays or five o'clock finishes (Scase and Goffee, 1987). Small business was beginning to be seen in a less glamorous light.

These concerns are echoed in much of the later literature which fragments into post enterprise culture pockets of ways of getting by. For example Burrows and Ford (1998) are concerned with the interaction between home ownership and self-employment, MacDonald (1996) with the role of the Enterprise Allowance and later Enterprise Grants, McCrone (1994) with managing and strategies in the household and Eardley and

Corden (1996) with the role of state benefits in households with self-employment strategies. The backdrop for these concerns comprises of the idea of the enterprise culture on the one hand, and the notion of flexible working on the other. Contradictions are brought to light, the enterprise culture is revealed as not quite the all glorious wheeling and dealing, flourishing productive and service industry, and the entrepreneur still goes her or his own way, and for many using the enterprise allowances or grants it's popularly seen as just 'dole for jobs'.

### **An Enterprise Culture**

A political rhetoric borne of the Thatcher years, the enterprise culture is the business bolt-on component of the cult of the individual. Together their message is to grow your own life and grow your own job. But there are anomalies here, as the cult of the individual does nothing to engender responsibility for others, so an enterprise culture which says yes, entrepreneurs are in, also implies that large workforces are out. And this has left the business schools seeking to make some sense of an enterprise culture as it appears for them and those they research. Heelas and Morris (1992) and Keat and Abercrombie (1991) produced collected works in companion volumes devoted to the notion of the enterprise culture, and its meaning for individuals and businesses. At the same time Burrows also put together a collection of chapters (1991). Heelas and Morris' work was concerned with the *values* of the enterprise culture, and Burrows with *deciphering* it.

Burrows (op. cit.) contextualises the enterprise culture as a newly emerging discourse following from profound social economic and political changes in the UK. And it is indeed the social, political and economic changes as so complexly interwoven which present these writers with the

challenge of making sense of what is meant by an enterprise culture. The way in which many of them tackle the problem is to present its metanarrative in juxtaposition with representations of the individual, whether in business or not, finding themselves very much the authors of their own destinies. As Rose puts it; "the vocabulary of enterprise links political rhetoric and regulatory programmes to the 'self-steering' capacities of subjects themselves ... Enterprise here designates an array of rules for the conduct of one's everyday existence: energy, initiative, ambition, calculation and personal responsibility" (1992:146). Heelas notes too that; "... increasing attention has been paid to ensuring that the 'new' world of enterprise is populated by people whose self understanding and psychological functioning is of the right kind"(1991:72).

By contrast, and from a sociological perspective, MacDonald and Coffield (1991) are not quite sure about this. Still approaching the world of work in the shadow of an enterprise culture, they find 'runners' 'fallers' and 'plodders' taking up the self-employed baton through the Enterprise Agency. They ask if what they are witnessing is a culture of enterprise or a culture of survival as unemployment pushes people into self-employment. What has attracted the interest of the social scientist about the enterprise culture here is the plight of the individual in the face of such social, political and economic change. According to MacDonald they're taking it personally; "... 'fallers' tended to attribute their business collapse not to external factors of the market place, or to internal limitations of the business, but *more to their own personal inadequacies*" (1996:442 emphasis added).

So the discourse of enterprise has been documented as accommodating the political, the economic and the social. Its main thrust has been to

promote the idea of the individual as responsible for her or his own well being, and the income that will service it. And with the rhetoric of full employment and a job for life long gone, a shift in responsibility from state to individual is couched in such liberating terms as "growing your own job" (Kanter 1989). We might ask then what has happened to the entrepreneur in this revitalised culture of enterprise. In a few decades in which a shift of political focus has moved the onus of welfare onto the individual, must we all turn into entrepreneurs? Taking the enterprise discourse as action Musson and Cohen seek to find the links between enterprise and entrepreneuring selves. They also discuss the difficulties of getting a perspective on an enterprise culture, so take as their starting point the "talk of individuals in small businesses" (1997:10). They conclude that this approach is more fruitful for; "tracking the relationship between individual accounts and the dynamics of the wider institutional context in which they take place" (ibid:19) yet reach no clear conclusions.

Findings have been mixed and reports from the front have not been that the enterprise culture is alive and well, rather that either businesses are flourishing due to particular entrepreneurial activities and interactions, or that they are failing for a number of - sometimes more personal - reasons (Carter and Cannon, 1992; MacDonald and Coffield, 1991 and Robinson, 1990). Those out looking for the enterprise culture seem to return with the individual.

... the forms of political reason that yearn for an enterprise culture accord a vital *political* value to a certain image of the self ... [which] resonates with basic presuppositions concerning the contemporary self that are widely distributed in our present,

presuppositions that are embodied in the very language that we use to make persons thinkable, and in our ideal conceptions of what these people should be. (Rose 1992: 141 original emphasis).

### **The Entrepreneur**

Sociologists neglect or demean the entrepreneur's role unpardonably: imagine a study of the church with no mention of the priest, except occasionally to condemn him root and branch (Marsland cited by Burrows and Curran 1989: 528).

Burrows and Curran thought this a wholly unfair accusation, and yet it is supported by Kanter's recollection of a general attitude towards entrepreneurs in the 1970s: "I remember the distaste with which some executives talked about 'entrepreneurs' ten years ago, as though it was a dirty word: 'creativity' had much the same flavour" (1989: 176). Perhaps Marsland's view of the position of the entrepreneur in an enterprise culture allows her or him too exalted a place, and yet the entrepreneur has been accorded a special place in the economy for some considerable time (Schumpeter, 1991: Smelser and Swedberg, 1994). That the entrepreneur's characteristics are now more likely to be associated with Anita Roddick than Arthur Daley, however, has not done much to assist our understanding of the entrepreneurial personality, but rather has pointed to a more rounded understanding grounded in social, cultural and economic context, see for example Chell et al (1991), Reynolds (1991) and Ripsas (1998). Although indeed the entrepreneur is still thought of as



a peculiar breed with particular psychological characteristics suited to buying and selling, or *taking between* which is what entrepreneur means, in a common sense sort of a fashion it is difficult to shed the idea that the heroine or hero of the enterprise culture is the entrepreneur.

As Robinson puts it; "several research studies have shown that entrepreneurs are convinced that they can command their own destinies ... In the jargon of the behavioural scientist, the 'locus of control' of the entrepreneur lies within himself rather than the world about him"(1990:10). Hence the necessity for explorations into the entrepreneurial personality, as a time honoured understanding of the entrepreneur prefers nature over nurture (Blanchflower and Oswald, 1991). So the entrepreneur has been treated in business studies as a particular type of person best captured through psychometric testing. Yet in the face of an enterprise culture and indeed in the face of diminishing employment in jobs for life, in a context in which we increasingly need such entrepreneurial skills ourselves, the utility of understanding merely the psychological trait of the entrepreneur has been questioned. Martinelli is surely correct in noting that; "... it appears that the most interesting [studies of entrepreneurship] are often located at the borders between disciplines ..." (Smelser and Swedberg, 1994:487).

Chell et al open out the field with a summary of the way in which sociological or organizational perspectives, economic perspectives and psychological perspectives on the entrepreneur compare (1991). And Reynolds, asserting that; "No one discipline or conceptual scheme can provide an adequate understanding of all aspects of entrepreneurship" (1991:67), puts the case for the entrepreneur in her or his socioeconomic context, in a commentary that contrasts greatly with the notion that the

entrepreneur believes her or him self to be the locus of control. Indeed he makes us aware of the frequently misguided assumption that for 'business person' we may as easily read 'entrepreneur', and for 'entrepreneur' we may read 'successful legitimate business owner'.

Entrepreneurial activity appears to play a key role in societal economic development but this often reflects deliberate policies adopted by the state (represented by the national government). Recent attention to the informal economy indicates that under some conditions a substantial unregistered entrepreneurial sector may develop, particularly when there are high costs associated with complying with legal requirements. (Reynolds, 1991:61)

Reflecting a desire to *understand* the practices and processes of the entrepreneur has led to more qualitative ways of researching which reflect those approaches aimed at addressing the enterprise culture (Carter and Cannon, 1992). Such approaches locate our understanding of the individual in her or his social, political and economic context. And Reynolds' comment above reminds us of Hobbs' study of 'entrepreneurs' most of whom were engaged in a very 'informal' economy. Our understanding of these characters depended in no small part upon our being able to ground them in their social, indeed local contexts. It is no longer fruitful only to portray the entrepreneur as something similar to Weber's charismatic leader, or as some abstracted ideal type, we must explore what she or he does, and why and in what context. (Carter and Cannon, 1992; Kanter 1990; Reynolds, 1991).

And this starts to reveal for us a rather different picture which lacks some charisma but grounds the entrepreneur in our own social world, as done so much earlier by Bechhofer and Elliot (1978). Recent studies separate into different ways of locating the entrepreneur, not as peculiar personality but socially and economically embedded. So a sensitive account of women entrepreneurs, (Carter and Cannon, 1992) in which the voices of women in business are presented in the text to give their own accounts of success and poignant failure, presents them as part of their family and locality, struggling to maintain their livelihoods and confronted with a mundanity not dissimilar to anyone else's. Their motivations for going into business and the embeddedness of their businesses are explored, (Phizacklea and Ram 1996) and indeed many don't see themselves as entrepreneurs at all (Hakim 1988).

A revival of an enterprise culture and the demand for heroines and heroes in the form of entrepreneurs has encouraged a deeper look at the entrepreneur in her or his context. This has revealed individuals embedded in their family and social lives, sometimes doing battle with economic life, and not always feeling particularly entrepreneurial. This way of making sense of the entrepreneur shifts our focus towards *entrepreneurship* as a collection of processes and practices.

### **Sociological concerns with work**

"To work is to mime creation itself" (Berger, 1975: 164).

Because; "... some form of production is essential to humanity both in providing the material structure of social life and in facilitation of the self-

realization of individual potential" (Grint,1991:92). But, ".... here the means of production are owned by a minority, where the majority own only their labour power, and where production is for profit through a commodity market, the result is not objectification but alienation" (ibid). It is not the activity but who organises it, and how, that defines work (Pahl, 1988). In short we need to produce but are denied the satisfactions that production should give us. The lack of satisfaction in work might be characteristic of factory or industrial labour, but the products of those factories became the consumer goods that compensated for the loss of pleasure or meaning in work.

As forerunners of a sociological concern with work, much of which has kept it in the central position ascribed to it by Marx and Durkheim, a split into conflict and consensus approaches has prevailed, with a preference for the conflict perspective (Cuff and Payne, 1981). And certainly a sense of the importance of work, and a work to live rather than live to work emphasis remains.

All the most interesting and valuable sociological accounts and discussions of work have been characterized by a compassionate concern for those who are condemned, by virtue of their location within the productive process, and the division of labour, to what Gouldner has recently described as the awareness (and experience) ... 'that work, as many know it, is nothing less than the wasting of life'(1969: 346). But for many people work represents not simply the lack of opportunities for creativity and self development, but has more definite and damaging

consequences - to health, family life, identity, and life chances (Esland and Salaman 1975:10).

In contrast to such a structuralist and disempowered perspective Weber brought a different methodological approach to the meaning of work. In his perspective we are not cultural dopes, but rationally self managing human beings, albeit within constraints and subject to our economic, social and political context. This context, Weber felt, was "... increasingly grounded in the symbolic and material advance of rationality" (Grint, 1991: 108). In this context decisions about one's life work and purpose were assessed in terms of costs and benefits, rather as Simmel asserted about exchange. We might ask how this rests with Weber's conviction that capitalism had succeeded due to its serendipitous relationship with protestantism. But if we remember that Weber considered there to be many forms of rationality, and that the grounds for these rested upon different values, then one's relationship with one's God might be seen to guide one's values, and hence the rationalities employed elsewhere in one's life. Grint comments that for those actors; "... the development of rational capitalism had not been their intention; they intended to serve God, but ended up serving mammon" (ibid: 110). There are, as Grint observes, problems with this connection, and yet he asks, why do people engage in such apparently bizarre work patterns, and ... "if the protestant ethic does not exist how do we explain the almost compulsive work behaviour of some?" (ibid:111). Recent explanations, alluded to earlier, are that our hearts and minds are captured by our employers, in an insecure world of work we either give ourselves over wholesale to the company (Hochschild, 1985) or are attracted into an illusion of freedom within it (du Gay, 1996).

### **The “ workers”**

Marx's class perspective is our starting point, and distinguishes for us two separate and stratified classes of proletariat and bourgeoisie, otherwise known as owners of the means of production and those who sell their labour. In the midst of these, and forming a middle class which will be accommodated into the bourgeoisie are those craftspeople and artisans, who benefit from a greater degree of autonomy and are not alienated from their work, but who are not in a position to take a part in or benefit from that superstructure of cultural and political life that income without labour allows. More complexly, Weber's distinctions, which also concern one's relation to the market, are founded upon class status and party distinctions. Class distinctions are particularly related to one's power in the market place, in terms of property ownership and bargaining position. What he means by status is one's position of prestige and social honour. We might make sense of this now in terms of one's cultural capital and kudos in one's locality. Finally one's party distinction is described in terms of goal related interest groups, so may again be made sense of in terms of local or national affiliations.

Marx's rather sweeping and structural stratification in terms of production relations tends to present us with the notion that the dynamics of change from pre-industrial to industrial ways of living were universal in space and time. However, Durkheim's assertion that anomie is a consequence of social norms lagging behind new industrial processes gives us a sense that this cannot be so. Kumar's (1988) historical account of change in England in this period suggests that changes towards what we call industrial society were by no means a universal turning of a page, but were changes which carried with them traditional ways of living, enabled and also constrained for many decades by the drive of factory wheels.

Kumar (op cit) describes a pluralist way of working in the eighteenth century in which households would have more than one source of income or means of subsistence, and the advent of factory work could not for some considerable time overrule the laws of nature and interfere with harvests and other seasonal imperatives. A powerful portrayal of disempowerment of the household to find its own means of subsistence locates it in a liminal position to macro changes. The state from the poor law onwards as it links with employment, fills and closes some of those gaps in which a household might find independent means. "For those workers in the right trades and industries this promised greater security and status. For others, de-casualization was a threat to their livelihood in circumstances where alternative ways of making ends meet were disappearing" (Pahl, 1988:163). Change is inscribed in time and space, and to understand the spread of state welfare intervention and its lack of reach, a walk through some rural regions even now, or a drink in an East End bar, will reveal that survival strategies remain to accommodate or even subvert what is now a state of retreating intervention (Hobbs, 1988 and Pahl, 1984).

Industrialization despite such strategies and subversions has been described as damaging to the contentment, consciousness and autonomy of the individual. Labour processes have drawn much attention from sociologists who have documented the Taylorist and Fordist approaches to production and concomitant conditions of labour for working classes (Reynolds, op.cit.). And the commodification of time as part of this process also discussed (Adam, 1995). Class perspectives on labour conditions have been founded upon marxist theories of alienation. Much attention in the name of alienation has been paid to an increasing division of labour in

which working conditions and workers as collectivities have been the focus of analysis (Burawoy, 1988) and the inevitability of working class kids getting working class jobs explored (Willis 1977). Further consideration of a working class consciousness has, however, yielded incompatibilities with traditional working class values (Goldthorpe, Lockwood et al, 1969). In the context of mass industrialism, in which Fordist modes of production suit capitalist enterprises, a rise in consumerism, the necessary outcome of capitalist production, has been seen to undermine a class consciousness *for itself* so hoped for by marxist analysts. A merging of class incomes and technological changes have made such structuralist accounts far more difficult to uphold (Bell, 1975 and Giddens, 1990). Such changes have been described as the beginning of post industrialization, which links to the concept of post modernity in so much as economic, social and political interrelate with cultural phenomena - and have heralded too the commentary from cultural disciplines that the fragmentation of mass and meta narratives marks the postmodern condition (Harvey, 1990 and Lyotard, 1984).

### **Fragmenting work**

In terms of industrial production, fragmentation may best describe the breaking up of mass industry into smaller sites of production, with the outsourcing of many of the processes that would once have been 'in house'. The products themselves have changed too. Much material production has given way to service sector industries, production is about consumerism, packaging, information and knowledge. Technological advances have at the same time accelerated these changes (Bell, 1975). The rise of a service sector, is not a sudden emergence but has been a gradual process and drawn commentary from those documenting gender changes in the labour force. Harvey (op.cit.) makes connections between



the flight of capital and the vulnerability of labour markets, whilst also describing the renewing and gentrification of regions to support new service and consumer outlets. His perspective makes sense of capitalist enterprise as global, with powers beyond the bounds of nation states, and this theme is the background to Beck's account of our world as now a risky place to be (1992).

Yet a global perspective might overlook the complexity of these changes and as Reynolds (op.cit.) asserts not only are functional equilibrium and class competition models not adequate to describe what it is that is going on, but there are anomalies explained either as dual economy or flexible labour market, which show that despite modern mass industries, small businesses prevail. So it is perhaps too simplistic to endorse Bell's reading of the then impending post industrial society in which; "indeed the entire area of blue collar work may have diminished so greatly that the term will lose its sociological meaning, as new categories, more appropriate to the divisions of the new labour force, are established" (Bell, *ibid*: 103).

Such accounts of post industrialism describe a world in which material production and extraction industries have moved away from the western sites of labour, and new technologies, particularly in communication and information technology, are fought over as regions and nations seek to attract global companies to bless them with their presence. A job is no longer for life, and for the individual in a post industrial world, career planning and flexibility, computer literacy and a bicycle will nevertheless fail to yield long term security. This period of change, loss of commitment to full employment and endorsement of enterprise may not be unprecedented, but has given rise to new ways of making sense of work for social actors and the sociologist.

We have now been irrevocably affected by what Aronowitz (1981) neatly terms "the crisis of historical materialism." That crisis, and that of modern thought more broadly, has triggered a reluctance to pursue analysis of sites we once believed harbored the seeds of social transformation. ... Production it seems, was modernity's concern. Nowadays, the cultural arena is the favored site for critical analyses. (Casey 1995: 8).

These sites were the factory floors, and sociology's concern was with the human condition in work. Esland and Salaman (1975) putting together a summative perspective of the sociology of work in the mid 1970s comment that the work context has fragmented and the sociology of work with it. This has given rise to a sociology of occupations, a sociology of professions, industrial sociology and a sociology of organizations. This fragmentation is criticised for depoliticising work and leaving capitalism unexamined.

### **Careers and Occupations**

"... for most of history men have *been* what they *did*"  
(Berger, 1975: 166).

An account of work which moves from pre to post industrialism inevitably reflects profound contextual change, and so changes in our theorising and methods. However, we cannot say that sociological studies of work were led only by economic and political context, as Chicago School sociology,

having at its doorstep rich opportunities for researching and valuing in research its subjects, has brought to sociology important ways of understanding careers and occupations which have anticipated the economic and political imperatives that make such research so vital today.

This section looks at the utility of such studies for an understanding of what we now mean by career, and leads us to a discussion of identity as this relates to work, jobs, occupations. Because now many of us may find ourselves stitching together careers, we are very much a part of the context, so in reading and writing about it we find we are both suspending a natural attitude even towards our own lives, and at the same time taking the longer and broader view in terms of action and social structures (Krause, 1971).

The literature separates into professions and careers, and most is concerned with careers *within* employment and the coming into and socialisation into professions. Bucher and Strauss (1961) note that the sociology of professions has erstwhile concerned itself with the "mechanics of cohesiveness" and the structures of particular professions. They, to use the camera lens analogy again, pull the focus in to account in detail the way in which roles in work are developed, conflicts negotiated and career ladders climbed. And they are careful to note that such ladders are not fixed. Becker and Carper (1956) and Becker (1961) concern themselves with the way in which students develop an identification with an occupation, considering the ways in which values and practices are internalised and reproduced. Such studies give a strong sense of the ways in which work identities are socially constructed, and the dynamic processes of internalisation and reproduction involved. Bensman and Lilienfeld (1975) contextualise this in terms of occupations per se,

suggesting that occupations take a particular stand towards the world which are grounded in their respective craft.

There is here an emphasis on *becoming* which is taken further by Pettigrew (1975) who sees such specialization in occupations as an emergent process, so we get a sense of individuals becoming professionals and the occupations into which they develop themselves developing particular identities. Becker and Carper state that their analysis; "suggests the operation of certain specific mechanisms producing changes in identity. These mechanisms ... consist of ways in which participation in organized groups of various kinds affects experience and, through this, self image" (1956: 296). Such becoming may also be seen as the acquisition of particular knowledges (Goffman, 1961; Coffey and Atkinson, 1994; and Fowler, 1997) and these knowledges are clearly institutionalised, however socially constructed. But:

Insofar as careers can be visualized and implemented because of the relative stabilities of those social structures within which one has membership, the continuity and maintenance of identity is safeguarded and maximised, and methods of maintenance and restoration are more readily utilized and evolved. However, the movement from status to status, as well as the frustration of having to remain unwillingly in a status, sets conditions for the change and development of identities. ... this way of looking at adult development is not at all restricted to occupational life. The lives of men and

women can - theoretically at least - be traced as a series of passages of status (Strauss, 1969: 109).

We start to get a sense then that we can no longer read off what a person is by what their job is, and this comes to the fore in Berger's work. "One very important result of the industrial revolution has been the crystallization of the so-called private sphere of life, a sociologically novel phenomena located interstitially between the large public institutions ... it provides for the individual a decisive alternative source of self-identification and personal meaning" (1975: 167). Berger's typology of work in terms of human significance divides work into that which still provides the opportunity for self fulfilment and commitment, that which is oppressive and not fulfilling, and that which is indeed a direct threat to self identity. Berger asserts that the first and last are shrinking, and that the sort of work that it is possible to have an ambivalence towards is increasing.

This is confirmed in Hughes' writing about work, which covers so very many aspects of attitudes towards work resonant with the attitudes conveyed by Berger and indeed self-employed and career orientated rather than job bound actors. Hughes portrays the actor as carving out a sense of self and self esteem in what might be perceived to be even the lowliest of employment, for example the janitor (1964). Yet, indeed in employment which might not be perceived to be lowly he tells us that our very schooling coaches us to portray our work in the very best light because; "... a man's work is one of the things by which he is judged, and certainly one of the more significant things by which he judges himself" (ibid: 42). Hughes' context is still one in which a job is pretty much for life, as he says; "... a man's work is one of the more important parts of his

social identity. of his self; indeed, of his fate in the one life he has to live, for there is something almost as irrevocable about choice of occupation as there is about choice of mate." (ibid: 43).

But the end of "organised capitalism" and the rise of flexible working as an environment allows scope for the individual to pursue her or his own life career, of which work is but a part, and we may now understand work as part of a context of greater choice. Recent literature shows the individual as using work for her or his own ends, and freeing her or him self from an imposed work identity, carving out strategies through which work is employed as one of many facets of lifestyle (Casey, 1995, Du Gay, 1996).

Career and occupations studies in sociology have looked at a growing ambivalence towards work, and focussed upon the ways in which individuals make sense of their working lives for themselves. Taken into the post industrial context we get the impression of greater scope for self expression, picking and choosing work which suits our lifestyle. Yet commentaries by Beck (1992) and Bell (1975) which document the end of full employment and the coming of a leisure society, and indeed a risk society, have contrasted with the notion of an enterprise culture, and indeed found it wanting on a number of points. Increased working hours and the dovetailing of work whether full time, part time or self-employed status with the dogged remains of a welfare state have shown that structural constraints in the nature of state intervention may make leisure or risk only a small part of our working lives, but strap us in to an economic accountability to the state.

Where these studies tend to look at the position of the individual, other accounts of changing ways of working, at least in the United Kingdom,

take into account the kin of the individual worker. Housing and other state benefits by definition take into account household income, the unit of measure is the household. For those in households without all adults in full time work, the ways in which the state may intervene will influence decision making processes (Pahl, 1988). As Allen puts it:

The contribution of the Thatcher years to breaking the post war consensus on full employment and the welfare state which held for almost forty years after the Second World War across the political parties, and between them and the electorate, is a matter over which there is much debate ... Our present economic and social situation is certainly not unique to Britain. The forces for change are much broader and their contours more complex. However they are experienced in specific local contexts and these play their part in the responses people make, as individuals and members of collectivities ... (1997: 56).

So we look to Pahl (1984), McCrone (1994), Anderson Bechhoffer and Gershuny (1994), Baines and Wheelock (1998) and Baines (1999) for perspectives on family and household strategies. The first, focussed upon families' work relations in Sheppey concludes that the state constrains rather than enables innovative work patterns. Where an adult member of a household is unemployed this constrains a partner's work opportunities unless that work lifts the household clear of benefits. Pahl concludes *in the 1980s* that this is leading to a process of polarization; "... with households busily engaged in all forms of work at one pole and

households unable to do a wide range of work at the other" (1984: 313). This is taken up by Burrows and Ford (1998) as they look at the impact house ownership has had on self-employment particularly throughout the recession.

Here we again converge with some of the business school literature, as researchers find state intervention and family strategies unavoidable. After all, work is, generally, a remunerative activity, and state intervention is for most of us inevitably of a fiscal nature. Our monetary interactions are seldom out of sight of state surveillance. Inevitable interest in family welfare or income has led to an increased interest in the family unit as a business and family strategies as opposed to the individual career strategy (McCrone, 1994 and Anderson, Bechhoffer and Gershuny, 1994). Baines and Wheelock (1998) and Baines (1999) have looked at the crucial role of a supportive partner or spouse in making a business work, emphasising that the actors in their studies are part of business families rather than merely running family businesses. And again these studies remind us that despite the new sounding enterprise culture, family business is certainly not a new phenomena in a state once dubbed a 'nation of shopkeepers'.

### **Self-employment**

Even allowing for ambiguities in the classification of employment status, it is clear that the UK experienced an exceptional boom in self-employment during the 1980s ... The increase in self-employment in Britain is all the more remarkable



when the experience of other comparable countries is taken into account (Eardley and Corden 1996: 22).

Having looked at the idea of an enterprise culture, the changing ways of working at the end of the twentieth century, and touched upon the work of those writers for whom a concern with work is also a concern with identity, we then finished with a consideration of work as bound into local and national processes through household and family. This connecting with context is so pertinent to an understanding of self-employment, as we begin to understand the self-employed in their “becoming” as “marginal men” (Davis, 1968).

### **Definitions of Self-employment**

Its liminal or marginal position in relation to the employment sector means that the definition of self-employment is forever contested; and is thus addressed first in most academic discussions about self-employment (Eardley and Corden, 1996; Hakim, 1988; Dale 1991). I don't want to dwell on this too much, as what I have taken to heart for this research is rooted in W. I. Thomas' dictum that if we take things to be real they are real in their consequences. However, a brief excursion into the literature will locate what we tend to mean by self-employment for those teetering on the edge of a safe income in the face of high unemployment and little security in employment.

Eardley and Corden explain self-employment via a journey through some of the contradictions that exist over definitions. They locate the root of the difficulties as coming from Inland Revenue's inadvertent obfuscations and state benefit agency confusions. "For taxation purposes, for example, the Inland Revenue classes those 'in business on their own account' as self-

employed and the rest as 'dependent employees'" (1996: 15). But note that Hakim (1988) refers to those who are self-employed as the 'residual group' when all other forms of work or non work have been defined. And this is akin to Eardley and Corden's account of how self-employment is defined for national insurance purposes. They note that at the point at which these misunderstandings need to be clarified the courts become involved, often to determine employment rights or rates of state benefit, and that, despite the frequency of their involvement, no clear definition has emerged. Citing Leighton who argues that as a consequence of this confusion even in the courts, self-employment as a status remains marginalized from mainstream legal protection, they suggest this marginalization is further reinforced by associations with what is called the informal economy, the informal economy being a euphemism for cash in hand work. Eardley and Corden go on to explain the ways in which self-employment is defined in surveys, the Labour Force Survey allowing actors to define themselves and resorting to tax and national insurance status only where confusion arises. However, household surveys define a person as self-employed even if they only do one hour of work a week as self-employed, yet for social security purposes the line is drawn at 16 hours a week. Pertinent to this research is the point they make that those; "... trying to start a small business and to move out of unemployment sometimes find it hard to know on which side of an apparent line they stand, especially if the process has been gradual" (1996: 17).

A rather different approach is taken by Rainbird (1991) whose paper is concerned with establishing whether or not those who call themselves self-employed are really small scale capitalists or merely disguised wage labourers. To this end she is concerned with the way in which value is created, whether surplus value is actually created, and how this is

distrubuted. She concludes that for the self-employed - particularly in a climate in which businesses contract out work - the surplus value remains with the contractor; the contractees, in other words the self-employed really are wage labourers. However, Burrows and Ford, concerned with the relationship between home ownership and self-employment state that their "focus has been on individuals who contribute capital and labour to the production process"(1998: 213). The implication being that if capital is put in, the benefits of capital may be withdrawn. It is not surprising to note that the waters are further muddied when we consider workers, who are often women, working from home, perhaps with partners in full time employment and so all but invisible to the Inland Revenue, National Insurance Office and Department of Social Security (Eardley and Corden, 1996; Hakim, 1988). Such muddy waters indicate grey areas and legislative minefields which don't enhance establishment views of self-employment.

Dale notes the problems of definition and works upon separating out the self-employed from the entrepreneurs in the context of the enterprise culture. This, she asserts, is crucial if we are not to find ourselves; "caught up in an unthinking acceptance of the rhetoric of government and the media" (1991: 35). She rightly notes that the effect of these differences is to be found in the statistics about numbers of self-employed, and that legal status, as noted above by Eardley and Corden, will vary. Crucially she notes that it is "vital to distinguish the proportion of self-employed people who survive in an uncertain market by working very long hours and accepting low profits or rates of pay and who, because of their weak labour market situation are exploited by 'employer' businesses" (ibid: 49). So Dale is at pains to have us understand that the self-employed person may not be at all like the entrepreneurial characters we discussed above.

The self-employed person may be pushed or pulled into their status by low levels of employment (Mac Donald and Coffield, 1991) and be making do with an Enterprise Allowance or Enterprise Agency Grant. This scenario contrasts starkly with an entrepreneurial environment into which; "... wheeler dealer atmosphere comes the young CID officer who, like the East Ender, has inherited a non-conformist deviant culture that values entrepreneurial boundaries of trading relationships"(Hobbs, 1988: 121). We should note here that to be entrepreneurial doesn't mean to be outside of the most formal employment! But neither does self-employment. Bryson and White (1996) in their study of the consequences of self-employment for the long term unemployed rather overlook this. Their study takes self-employment and unemployment as two distinct labour markets, leaving out the blurred edges of part time employment and occasional freelancing whilst growing one's own business.

For the purposes of this research I return to those defining situations as real, being real in their consequences, and as such come closer to the socially constructed context described by Hobbs, even if my actors categorically dismiss the notion that they are entrepreneurial, and all did. Nevertheless, they defined themselves as self-employed. Eardley and Corden consider, as we have earlier, the now outmoded perspectives on work in which self-employed actors tended to be seen as the petit bourgeoisie.

"This traditional sociological approach to self-employment has depended upon the idea that working 'on one's own account' is linked intrinsically with ownership, autonomy and control over production, clearly distinguishing craftspeople,

independent professionals and small business proprietors from waged workers. Evidence on the changing nature of self-employment in the last decade suggests that such a clear distinction is no longer tenable. ... What appears to have happened more recently is a marked increase in the number of people whose legal and contractual status is that of self-employment, but whose actual work situation may be far from that of the petit bourgeois small business owner" (Eardley and Corden 1996: 14 and citing Dale 1986).

To this end it is worthwhile considering the literature about home working and freelancing, gender and family as findings give much to our understanding of the day to day lives of self-employed people whether working at home or not, as individuals embedded in their respective local, indeed micro, contexts.

### **Homeworking and freelancing**

"The appearance of the domestic sphere as a private domain, outside the truly social space of work and politics, is a Victorian middle-class construction; its privatization was founded on the exclusion of women from paid work and their idealization as morally superior 'angels in the house'"(Phizacklea and Wolkowitz 1995:14).

Discussions about homeworking almost invariably become discussions about women's work. And discussions also tend to look at the home as very much the private domain, overlooking the differences between homes and ways of working *in* or *from* them. The points at which current research into homeworking or freelancing meet with work about self-employment are those that focus upon exactly these concerns, the private sphere of the home, and the gendered differences in work, in or out of the home.

However, the popular and polarized debate around home working concerns itself with different issues which we should acknowledge and which inform discussions about gendered differences in work. The debate takes the view on the one hand that working from home is liberating, or on the other that it is exploitative (Hakim, 1988; Phizacklea and Wolkowitz, 1995; Jurik, 1998). So much research into homeworking has sought to establish some idea of what it is like, what the benefits and disadvantages are to working from home and for whom. Hakim (1988) finds that those homeworkers involved in manufacturing or assembling materials for large industries may indeed be exploited. On the other hand those in white collar work at home feel better off for a number of reasons. These tend to have to do with child care expectations from work which are not exclusively economic. She is however criticised by Phizacklea and Wolkowitz who suggest that womens' expectations are entirely different from mens', and that women who work at home may choose to do so because they are simply not happy with 'man made days'. (1995: 12). Phizacklea and Wolkowitz find the home working / working from home distinction inadequate, and suspect that the "social inequalities which arise from class, 'race' and gender relations are simply replicated and reproduced in the homeworking labour force, structuring women's access

to different types of work and pay and conditions" (1995: 68). This turns into a structure: action debate, and rages unresolved.

Pahl, (1984) takes a different perspective, looking at the household as a productive unit, but nonetheless accepts the household as a privatized sphere. Indeed, with reference to Gershuny's perspective he sees the household as considerably more privatized as technological innovation makes it easier for households to produce their own goods and services. This he refers to as English Individualism. Gershuny is criticised for a pessimistic assertion that increased household technology and the opportunity that this affords for informal economic growth will reduce women's paid work. In a decade we have seen that this is not the case, indeed we have seen that increasing self-employment, much of it at or from home, is self-employment that engages with the market or formal economy (Jurik, 1998).

I think much must be made of the argument by Jurik, whose research looks at self-employment at home rather than home working. In addition to looking at the ways in which self-employed home working reproduces and challenges conventional work arrangements in terms of gender, family, status, race and resources, Jurik looks at market conditions. As she says of self-employment it "no longer embodies the autonomy and productive capacity of previous decades; it is vulnerable to market forces dominated by large corporations ... Given that self-employed homeworkers are often the sole proprietors of very small businesses, they are especially susceptible to market cycles" (ibid: 9). The self-employed as we know, are not all voluntarily self-employed (MacDonald and Coffield, 1991). And they find themselves in the frequently reluctant and uncomfortable position of having to do their own marketing (Jurik, 1998). Jurik finds, I

think surprisingly, although as she points out this has something to do with the time at which she interviewed, that some self-employed homeworkers distinguish themselves from just being exploited homeworkers and refer to themselves as entrepreneurs, in stark contrast to many other researchers' findings. However, this assertion is tempered by the finding that many limit their expansion and growth so that they will remain home workers with no employees.

In limiting themselves to working from home, alone, many find that they are isolated (Hakim, 1988) and that this is the major disadvantage of homeworking. Baines (1999) finds this not to be the case but draws her sample from business networks, so her freelancers are by definition networked already. She points to insecurities in the workplace (which may be home) and dependence upon the family as an important focus for research. The issues then that need to be brought forward as pertinent to this thesis are those of isolation, family dependence and market interactions. It may have been true that at one time it was possible to have a cottage industry in which one's market was one's friends and family, in a privatized sphere and a semi or informal economy. We have seen, however, that an enterprise culture and state intervention invade this sphere, and working from home has become legitimate and public with or without familial support. And although family participation may now be the norm (Baines and Wheelock, 1998), I feel that there are difficulties which arise, particularly for those newly self-employed as they attempt to externalise themselves and their work in a market meritocracy whilst bound into the traditional demands of the family home. To make sense of these difficulties we need to consider the step by step processes and strategies, successes and failures of those becoming self-employed, and *employing themselves as self-employed*.



In this chapter I have looked primarily at two sets of literature which are about work. I have used them to draw attention to the different ways in which work has been understood, and how these understandings are changing. Different themes have been drawn from the literature, the business school studies have explored the notion of enterprise and entrepreneurs to usefully set the actors in this study into context. Sociological work has provided a socio-economic context (Smelser, 1976) and also provided us with different ways of looking at what goes on in work and peoples' meanings about work. Finally, the complicated phenomena of self-employment has been presented, and its likeness to home working and freelancing noted. I have in this thesis been less concerned with terms than with processes; what it is like to be becoming self-employed. In the following chapters I have worked towards an understanding of self-employment through the apprehension of actors' step by step processes. This chapter has, through an account of the business schools' and sociological literature, set up a backcloth for the study. The backcloth serves two purposes; firstly to present the academic context for the study; secondly, and most importantly, to present the context in which individuals take their first entrepreneurial steps.

## **Chapter Two, Biographies in Context**

This chapter introduces my research by giving first of all a brief outline of County Durham. This is the region in which the self-employed actors I have talked to live their lives and conduct their businesses. It is very much a perspectival account of the North East of England and County Durham as a part of it. The chapter also contains much about how I came to be here, both geographically and in terms of my experiences and career. So the view I give of the area is through my getting here, and my understanding of the area as my explorations have developed. These explorations have involved simply living here, driving or walking in different parts of what is in places a ruggedly rural county, unearthing local history through the libraries, and getting to know of present policies for the county through policy documents. In addition conversations with local self-employed or aspiring self-employed people help frame the perspectives here, as do conversations with people at local business clubs and support agencies. Most details of these are presented in later chapters, but I draw attention to this now as this sort of research doesn't switch itself on and off during 'working hours' so places and events such as the Miners' Gala are as much a part of this work as a formal interview may be. The chapter continues by introducing the main actors of the research, setting them in their respective contexts and providing the reader with an opportunity to start to get to know them as I have done. It is also an opportunity to get to know me, as I reflect upon my experiences as a self-employed person, albeit in another part of the country, and a good few years ago. The chapter continues with sketches of the rest of the actors I started off my research by interviewing.

I am not trying to suggest that self-employment varies in different economic and geographic contexts, or that it is the same everywhere, even though both suggestions could be forced. Rather I am setting the context of a region, like others, trying to re-develop, improve, sustain itself in the wake of global changes, with its particular strategies and vocabulary for this. At the same time I am setting the context as I see it and tell it, with my own strategies and vocabulary. At this stage the vocabulary is, well here it is, on the page, and the strategy is merely to present candid but not exhaustive description.

### **Context**

My first glimpse of the North East of England was 11 years ago. It was only a fleeting glimpse at that. I arrived by car and the A1, at least in most places, was narrower than it is now but the traffic certainly less heavy. I expected to see cloth caps and coal mines, but they had been removed, scalping had already taken place. So it was with some surprise that I was guided around the Metro Centre, a sophisticated church to retail with a devout congregation. My next foray beyond Birmingham was a few years later, when I spent some days touring Northumberland, Weardale and Teesdale by car, once again struck by the lack of stereotypes and overawed by the rugged landscapes, which made the Cotswolds look like a garden of dolls houses. The third entre was to be more permanent, as here I still am, in Durham, and it is within County Durham that I have undertaken this research. During these 11 years and longer the county has seen many changes, particularly the closing of the last of the pits and the changing nature of work in the region.

Getting to know the county was very much dependent upon my income and mode of transport, so as a car-less student I found myself very

quickly familiar with the footpaths and cycle routes around the city and along the river, but anywhere further afield was gauged and mapped in my head in terms of train journeys. Durham City seemed to me to have stood still in time, and as I walk in to the centre over Prebends Bridge, 'Grey Towers of Durham' inscribed upon it, I feel the weight of generations of pilgrims, academic and spiritual, who have walked the same way. In the summer their ghosts become embodied again as aged professors and clerics, and southerners with children stand and point out to their companions where they once trod and drank and boated. They eye up my bag, is it full of books, am I a local or a student, part of the performance or a spectator too?

It is hardly possible, even as a student, to remain oblivious to the economic conditions of the North East. It is a region which has a mixture of rural and urban areas, and the gradations between the two are a hinterland of pit villages every bit the setting for "The Good The Bad and The Ugly". If such bleakness isn't sufficient a clue to a difficult past and present, local histories make it quite clear that the area has long had a history of high unemployment. One such, Dewdney (1970), describes how County Durham in particular came to have the debris of deserted hill farms and small holdings stumbled across on rambles through the hills of Weardale and Teesdale. These rural areas were left sparsely populated as their inhabitants went east to new industries in the nineteenth century, leaving thinly populated villages around the old market towns. The migration to new industry gave rise to the red bricked rows of houses clustered around the coal pits whose wheels and wagons are now stuffed with pansies and adorn ring-road roundabouts. The classic text "Coal is our Life" (Dennis et al, 1956), may be based upon a Yorkshire location, but its title trips off the tongues of Durham people still. Local histories of

the area are not histories without the inclusion of the names and sizes of nearby coal seams, and mining processes, cheek by jowl with accounts of which shops were in the main street.

Memories of coal live on through the ritual of the annual celebration of the Durham Gala, the meeting in Durham of the colliery bands and workforces for performances, speeches, blessings and celebration. Since I have lived here the Gala - threatened with irrelevance as the mines closed - has swung from dejection and defiance to find a new resilience. Now the miners sell prints of sketched pit memories, and collections of poems, short stories and models carved out of coal. They are some of the newly self-employed in a new enterprise culture. Some of the older people still look glazed with the shock of change, but others don't do so badly. Arthur takes my order for a print he's produced of a group of miners at the coal face. His friends hustle for him " *'E's got a book here too and 'e'll sign it for you'*". I'm eager that Joe should choose the print and listen to Arthur explain what the picture is about to him. We listen to this 'real live' miner tell his story, I buy the book, I collude in the irony as he plays the part of 'real live miner' now self-employed, but our listening is a part of his telling, and his story like those of the self-employed actors in this study, needs telling. A few days later Arthur delivers our print, my neighbour calls out a greeting to him, and then turns to me "Oh yes I know Arthur, he did our windows."

In recent years the North East has been a focus for European Community funding, and 'regeneration' is still the buzz word for the region. In the wake of shipbuilding, steel industry and coalmining decline, glossy brochures abound with optimistic sound bites: "Hardheaded pragmatism has countered the North East's physical isolation and relative smallness

to create a remarkable industrial rebirth", (North East Plc, 1996). I wonder what this phrase has to do with streets like the one I shop in, a few miles out of Durham, an old pit village. Here a florist opens and a grocery closes, then a hairdresser opens and the pizza parlour closes, with such regularity and frequency that the changing facades provide a sort of giant shifting kaleidoscope. But as I read on through these glossy brochures I realise that I should be raising my head higher, or better still climbing to the top of a hill from where I may survey the large grey cubes that have landed and flown again: Komatsu, Fujitsu, Samsung, Siemens.

These large grey sheds reflect a globalization of capital in which the ties between industries and their workforces are severed and localities are left floundering. As I wrote this, Siemens was under threat from economic crises in the East, and as I edit this, call centres are replacing these sheds. The frailty of attracting big capital to disempowered regions as a strategy for survival has not entirely gone unnoticed. And despite their gloss, the regional regeneration brochures reflect what is noted elsewhere in Europe; that industrial restructuring has resulted in a decline in large manufacturing industries and manual jobs and that different strategies are needed. Although presented to attract inward investment, these brochures and reports are beginning to turn their attention towards a local strengthening of economic activity. The policy for the North East is to adapt to this restructuring and develop workforces with competencies both to attract new industries and be suitable employees for them. But together with this new businesses are encouraged, both to start up and to remain located in the North East. It is recognised that in a region particularly given over to manufacturing and a dominance of large employers, the proportion of self-employed and small businesses is lower than the national average (North East Labour Market Report, 1997/8). To this end

many policies are directed towards encouraging " ... entrepreneurial skills, self-reliance and flexibility ... through education, training and experience of work" (Economic Development Strategy for County Durham 1995 - 2001).

Policies are put into practice, or the big pictures supposedly translated into smaller practical ones, through the myriad of support agencies in the region. These range from the Training and Enterprise Councils, the Business Links, the Enterprise Agencies and Development Agencies, to the unfunded Business Clubs and a scattering of informal networks of business people. Added to these are the increasingly upbeat and optimistic business publications for the region, and business pages in the local newspapers. Whereas at one time it was possible to walk underground from one pit village to the next through the maze of coal mining tunnels, now the county is crisscrossed with more ethereal networks as it goes on-line.

It is in this context that I introduce the self-employed people that I have come to know in the course of this research, and I reflect upon the course of my own foray into self-employment. The North East and County Durham policy documents make much of their entrepreneurs, citing them by name as 'local (usually boys) made good'. I begin with the stories of the actors I have spent the longest time getting to know and be with. I then move on to those I spoke to at the outset of my research, the participants in semi-structured in-depth interviews. Some of these actors may indeed be 'local boys made good', many are not.

### **Angela's story**

Angela lives with her partner and her two children, the children are both in their teens. They live in a rented terraced house on the outskirts of a small

town, an old coal mining town five or six miles out of Durham. The area is not wealthy and house prices are relatively cheap. Although on main bus routes between Durham and some of the larger old rural market towns, and crossed by two roman roads, there is little other than retail trade here, although new small business units have been introduced on the outskirts.

Angela graduated as a mature student from a university in the South of England, and decided soon after that that she would start her own business. Her business is about designing promotional and training materials for clients, both private and corporate, using, where appropriate, computer and video equipment. Although much may be done on-line, living where she does a car is essential. She has a business name, but in a sense as the skills she offers are broad and adaptable to any number of purposes and situations, she herself admits that it is very difficult to categorise exactly what she does.

We first met in the local library where she was doing some preparatory research, and, striking up conversation we discovered we had lots in common, not least that she was about to embark on a career of self-employment, and I was researching the experiences of self-employed people. In a sense then we had something to offer each other, she would allow me to follow her progress and I would provide a sounding board. At the time the reciprocity of this arrangement wasn't discussed. I felt that I gained far more from this than Angela did. During our first conversations I was able to provide insights and encouragement that she felt useful to her at this initial stage of self-employment, but my presence in the end was, I felt, a mixed blessing.



At this stage Angela was attending the Enterprise Agency courses and going through the steps required by them to launch her into business. These steps involved exploring the market and finding clients prepared to purchase or commission her work, and preparing cash flow forecasts and a business plan. Her plan was to develop her business in the North East but eventually, and predominantly via the Internet, develop a national clientele. For this location isn't too important, although since finding she has had to make practical inroads into a market through doing 'bread and butter work', location has become an issue.

Angela was feeling that she was having to jump through hoops to get started, exploring issues such as this were some of the hoops. However, at this time she was talking about these issues as unproblematic and felt she had cleared them all successfully. It was a few months before we made contact again; we spoke on the telephone and arranged to meet again. I found Angela far less confident in her decision to become self-employed. She had delayed making the final jump and launching her business, saying she felt that she hadn't at that stage sufficient contacts to draw her off income support.

It was of paramount importance to her that she did not risk the well-being of herself and her children. This concern was reiterated often in the course of my research time spent with Angela, although she did, eventually, "slide" into self-employment. An incentive was provided through her contact with another business person, together they were about to go after a big contract with a national company. This was to be the 'big one' which would set her afloat in the sea of business.

I wonder if I should provide physical descriptions of this 'family' of self-employed people that I have been interviewing. I find it unavoidable with Angela, because I know her appearance is significant to her, and altering it, enhancing it or just using it as it is, is something she does quite consciously. She is in her late thirties, tall and with striking features. Resorting to a cliché, she has that sometimes envied ability to stop conversations as she enters a room. This is accomplished, I suppose, by what is inherently aesthetic and by the grace with which that is carried. Worthy of note is that she manages to maintain this grace in at least those back spaces of her life that I have entered, carrying herself like an African queen.

Putting this visible self together is important to Angela, not in a narcissistic way but in a professional concern with looking her best within what is appropriate, for particular or significant occasions. It also has a "feel good" effect for her. Speaking about the way in which appearance is important, comfort is also paramount, if she feels good it must include feeling comfortable, squeezing into squeaky shoes is not her line at all. The feel good factor extends into the way in which Angela treats, cares for and feeds herself. On one occasion she remarked that she had decided to treat herself to some salmon for that day - a decision also taken by one of the other actors in the study on the same day. But what is remarkable is not the coincidence so much as its importance to them, and their reporting of the decision to me.

A concern with visible impact does not extend to Angela's accommodation, which stretches William Morris' useful and beautiful to the extreme. Her space is welcoming and vibrant, cluttered with bits and pieces that reflect

her personal interests and desires. So it should, this is her back space, this is not shared with clients and customers, it is hers and her family's. Entering her workspace involves greeting and being greeted by the dog, sometimes the cat and even sometimes the chorus of birds outside the kitchen window. Conversation always starts here over her own blend of freshly ground coffee, before we pick our way through the family debris to reach her workspace. Angela's workspace is a tiny overstuffed office in the very depths of her house, hidden, even shielded, by the domestic barriers. It's the very 'backest' of back spaces, yet in here she's on-line to anywhere and everywhere, with every possible permutation of communications technology up and running. This is where I'd watch her work, we'd drink coffee, and I'd fail to give up smoking. This is where we used to sit and chat when, during the time I accompanied her, she was at her most industrious. At other times, when at a low ebb, we only ever got as far as the living room, and conversations were gentler, and deeper.

Angela and I, as I noted above, have more in common than self-employment. We have the same motorways between us and our roots. She has worked in tough but creative situations, and has worked constantly, stopping only to study as a mature student. When she speaks of her childhood she gives the impression of having had to fend for herself from an early age, developing in her teens a distrust of others and some strong barriers with which to protect herself. This seems to come through in the way in which she expresses herself, having no inhibitions about subject matter, but an evasive way of answering questions.

### **My story**

My story starts with a train of thought I had when I was eight years old. I remember strolling down a field next to a hedge which triggered a utopian

daydream. At this age you're not very big, so hedges and banks feel enormous and inviting, comfortable dens. I dawdled down the field next to the hedge thinking that it would be very easy and very nice to live in it. I could live on blackberries and mushrooms and hazelnuts without a care in the world: I could be a hermit, do what I wanted when I wanted and not be at anybody else's beck and call. My mind's meanderings continued: could I really live on just three things? I'd need bread, so I'd need the wheat to make the flour and so on. I would have nothing to swap for wheat, so I would have to pay for it.

This musing drew me to the realisation that I would have to barter, and the more diverse my wants the more I would have to become integrated into an exchange system. I couldn't after all be a hermit, no matter how independent and self-sufficient I was there would be some things that I would need or want - because, of course, my train of thought progressed to ice cream in the summer - and with this inevitability the reluctant acceptance that money was necessary, and therefore, that with every exchange some would be paid in taxes. I remember feeling grumpy at this prospect, recalling my father's grumblings about paying so much of his hard earned income in tax.

I'm sure I've not given one moment's conscious thought to this daydream since, until I started exploring self-employment with its bids for freedom and inevitable constraints. That said, I must never have favoured a traditionally structured working life, my first job was in an Arts Centre, where days might have started at nine o'clock in the morning but often didn't finish until one o'clock the next morning. After this, and a couple of conventional jobs, I started to explore the idea of being self-employed. I didn't know what business I wanted to be in, but I did know that I wanted

to be able to support myself, dictate the hours I worked and be able to have children without being constrained to leaving them with childminders from a young age whilst I was obliged to return from maternity leave to my job. I shunned the security of a job to return to, preferring to find my own way to provide for myself and any offspring that might come along.

Finding my own way involved making hand-dyed and sewn silk wall-hangings and selling them in galleries in Covent Garden. In preparation for this I remember preparing a cash flow forecast, talking to the bank manager about it and the Enterprise Allowance Office. I can't now recall why on earth I chose to make wall hangings, I do know that if it wasn't for Enterprise Allowance funding I would not have survived the first year, there simply wasn't a big enough market for them and I couldn't begin to cover in price the time it took me to make them. At that time I had a business partner, but the honeymoon was short-lived as she returned to conventional employment. I was to wish time and time again on bad days that I had done the same. It seemed to me that only a naive stubbornness kept me self-employed for so long, and only this recent research has exorcised the shudders.

Silk wall-hangings were never going to make me an adequate living, and I realised quite quickly that some basic bread and butter line was needed before the Enterprise Allowance ran out. So we placed an advertisement in the local paper advertising a curtain-making service, and this was to be the start of many watersheds or bifurcation points. The first was the parting of the ways between my business partner and myself for many reasons irrelevant here but worthy of a book of my follies. The curtain-making service took off quite well, and grew until I found myself spending most of my time in the car running between seventeen outworkers and the

many windowed customers. At this stage I felt that I was on a treadmill that I just couldn't get off. I had been working from a trading estate until pregnant and poor I could no longer afford the rent. My husband's business was struggling so the house became workshop, office and studio for us both. I was in the middle of furnishing quite a large house when Joe was born, and three weeks after his birth was back on the site fitting swags and tails, my client obligingly carrying Joe around the garden whilst I was sweating up ladders in her drawing room.

The rest of that first year with Joe is a blur of tiredness, somewhere within which I completed an enormous contract my 'big one', became VAT registered, expanded into interior design and opened a studio. Not long enough after that the housing market crashed, pulling builders, developers, construction companies, architects and interior designers down with it. I continued for another three years. In my last year of business I found myself teaching interior design in my studio in the evenings after spending the day wearing all the hats that I'd erstwhile subcontracted out. I still felt as if I was strapped to a treadmill, unable to look up, step back, draw breath. I was unable to make any decisions other than on a day-to-day basis, saw little of Joe and was not in wonderful health. In this situation I felt isolated, unable to talk to anyone about my business affairs, if friends or family showed concern at my tiredness I simply replied that I had no choice, I had to go on, giving up just didn't enter my mind.

### **Alan's story**

Alan is someone that shares the same dogged determination that I had. He has been self-employed for about three years, and is yet to reach some sort of plateau from which he can turn to survey his progress and

pick his path for the next part of the climb. This is not to imply that he is rushed off his feet, as he is still trudging forward painfully slowly, but his time is consumed with thinking up ways to get more customers, where to get them from, and how to keep them.

We met at a local business club, Alan was there to promote his business with a spot of networking. My first impression of him was that he was a sincere person, quiet and confident in his knowledge about his line of work. He had been made redundant from the local shipyards and had decided to retrain as a specialist in muscular injuries, as health and fitness issues were an abiding interest anyway. We struck up a conversation which quickly turned to health and diet. I went away with an arrangement to visit Alan at his place of work - and a new resolve to eat more beetroot.

Alan lives alone in one of the older mining villages in the county. He has a mortgage on a small terraced property originally the marital home, he's now divorced, and has no children. He was born in the very same area, and has lived there for all of his forty odd years. His parents, now elderly, are nearby. Quietly spoken, Alan gives the impression of being full of thoughts and never idle even when sedentary. He is passionate about health and fitness, his own and others, and not so much lives healthily but works with deliberation at maintaining his body and mind in a state of peak condition poised for action. In this state he appears tense and focussed on a target, indeed it has not been easy getting Alan to talk about himself as he persistently turns back to his goals and aims. In an almost ascetic fashion he shuns relaxation, frivolity or luxury, driving himself hard at what he does. Although living a good five miles (of hilly countryside with bitter winds) away from his place of work, Alan cycles in

all year round, considering a car to be a luxury beyond his means at the present.

Alan can take his work to clients houses, but has a room from which most of his work is done, in one of the county's older industrial towns, now suffering from the closure of the steel industry in the area. Very often our subject of discussion is the appropriateness of the locality, and the appropriateness of the site for his business. His room is at the rear of a hairdressers, on the first floor of what must have been a magnificently vibrant building at the turn of the century. Its high ceilings still give it the air of an old time dance hall, the salon furnishings dwarfed in the vast space. Yet Alan's room is a tiny box beyond the salon's paraphernalia, in which it is almost possible to reach out your arms and touch both walls at once. It is sparsely furnished with a couch for massage taking up the lion's share of the space in the centre, and a bookshelf furnished with books on healthy eating and how to succeed in business. Below the window which spans the entire width of the far wall is a bench on which I habitually sit as we chat. Alan draws up the folding chair, the tape recorder set between us picks up the background banter of the salon in stark contrast to this clinical box.

When we met, Alan was finding it difficult to get sufficient clients on his books, he felt that his marketing wasn't quite right and wanted another opinion on it. He had designed a leaflet which stated on it the services he offered, his qualifications and on the reverse a collection of brief testimonials from past and existing clients. However, he felt that perhaps the leaflet was still too obscure, and that his business name, which he felt expressed the seriousness of his work, could not adequately express at a



glance the benefits of his services. For Alan, like Angela, finding a way to express succinctly what he does is a continual problem.

Both Angela and Alan were game to have me visit them, interview them and simply spend time with them in the hope that I would come up with some helpful perspective on some aspects of their businesses. It turned out with both that, for different reasons, the gates were not as widely flung open as I imagined they would be. But then it's easier to sound keen and encouraging until all of a sudden there's several kilos of person sitting in your space. I wonder, had I had the opportunity, whether I would have welcomed in a researcher to spend time with me. In the middle years, when business was booming and exciting I may well have, jumping at the chance of a bit of free labour and someone to make the coffee, but in the early years, the years of angst spent in the attic room, somehow the space would have seemed too small and I would have felt that there was nothing to see.

Angela and Alan have never voiced any concern that there might be nothing going on for me to see, even though it is their early years of angst that I am witnessing and party to. Freda, on the other hand, always in chaos and kaleidoscopic days, is forever bemused that I should be so interested in her.

### **Freda's story**

Freda's name was given to me by the Enterprise Agency, from whom I had a list of newly self-employed people. Our first contact was by telephone, when I called to explain about my research and ask if I might visit her. Her reaction was one of amusement that someone 'from the university' would be the least bit interested in her. Freda's isolation is, if in no other way,

geographic. She lives with her husband, three children and mother-in-law, in an old rural dwelling with a fresh water spring instead of mains water, and a generator and candles instead of mains electricity. When I say instead of, I don't mean that she has an option, mains services simply don't reach their home. When she refers to neighbours she's talking of the people in the farm three miles away. She's about fifteen miles out of the nearest rural town, and frequently cut off by bad weather in the long north eastern winters.

It's an hour's drive to Freda's workshop, presently an old hayloft above a riding stables, where she runs her saddlery business. The space has been carpeted out and has a comfortable old sofa at one end, television and toddler's toys scattered around, crayons on her desk and chocolate biscuits on the bench. There's a horsey smell from the stables below and leather everywhere.

Freda is in her early thirties. Coming from a rural background she had always wanted to be a saddler, and in between having her three children, trained in the craft. She was timid about actually going self-employed, but even more timid about having to get a job, especially with three young children to cope with. She and husband Martin took some considerable time and trouble drawing up a business plan and cashflow forecasts to establish how she should launch into self-employment. She duly presented these at her interview with the Enterprise Agency and, not without some difficulties, started up her business. At first she worked at home but it became impossibly cramped and the demands of the household and the demands of the business on one generator proved too much. She had started servicing the needs of the riding stables and was able to strike up a deal with them which allowed her space in the hayloft in

return for prompt and convenient saddlery repairs. She is only able to be in the workshop between school hours, so nearly always takes work home with her to finish once the children are in bed. Martin is also self-employed, dividing his working activities between building, helping with some of the saddlery, and helping another local builder out when funds are low.

On my first visit to her workshop I found Freda wrapped up in layers of jumpers, warm work shirt and jeans, not a hint of expensive jodphurs anywhere. Although she talks of being constantly flustered, the atmosphere there is calm for her and her youngest daughter, not yet at school. We chatted about how her business was going, and what her hopes and fears were for it. She spoke of a few dilemmas, concerning the nature of the work she was doing and whether she was in the right location. Despite being able to say; "I am a saddler", she too seemed to find it difficult to express, in advertising for clients, exactly what she was able to offer, and what she wanted to offer. Unlike Alan and Angela, she was able to mull over these problems with Martin, and at the time at which I fell into step with them they were mulling over what changes they wished to make, and how to make them. In the absence of a business adviser, accountant or bank manager that they could think aloud to - they explained that that was a luxury they could ill afford - I became a sounding board for their plans.

### **Patricia's story**

Patricia has come to self-employment later in life, having risen through the ranks of the civil service to management positions. Redundancy stunned her as she had lived for her work. One of the first things she shared with me was the history of longevity her family had, and as she recounted this

and her expectation to live long too, her dread at the prospect of a good thirty years or more of idleness was apparent. She is in her late fifties, comfortably off and living in the city with her husband in what the estate agents of the region would call 'well appointed' housing. Describing herself as rigorously independent and always having been in a position in which she would be able to support herself, she is determined that her work should not bring in mere pin money, but that it should be worthy of what she calls 'real work', by bringing in a real income. Patricia married late, having rejected two earlier proposals on the grounds that she would have been expected to give up her job. That she is happily married now is in no small part due to the fact that her husband respected how much she valued her work, to the extent that when one career had to be sacrificed - for geographic reasons - his was the one to go.

I came across Patricia's advertisement in the local Enterprise Agency's list of new businesses. She advertises as a publications business, and the advertisement lists the nature of the publications the business deals with. The advertisement seemed to me to have a 'feminine' feel to it, which it turned out didn't overtly reflect the nature of the business at all. I rang Patricia, arranged to see her and shortly after, visited her at her home.

She reminded me of a character from a children's story, Mrs Pepperpot, as she opened the door to me, with grey wispy hair neatly tucked into a bun and dressed so trimly. She speaks with quiet efficiency and, (unlike the children's Mrs Pepperpot) without fussing at all gives out a sense of kindness and trust. I have tended to start off first visits to potential actors in an informal way, leaving the tape recorder for another day and going through a few initial details to see if I have found a suitably young business. It also gives both of us the opportunity to see if we get on with

sufficient ease for as non-intrusive a relationship as possible to develop. Patricia had met me more than half way on this, in preparation for our meeting she had made copious notes about her business and her publications, so that after we had talked I might look at them and make more sense of what we had discussed.

It turned out that Patricia was only publishing her own books, and that these were guide books for carers of older people. In the year in which she had been in business she had written and published three of these, and was receiving regular orders for each one. At the stage at which I started to visit her she was about to take a change of direction, and start writing plays. She has a long term business plan in her head which doesn't have a big goal and a trophy at the end of it but a series of stepping stones stretching from here to the next millenium. She spoke once of what she expected to achieve by the end of the century, adding '*this century*' should I be in any doubt as to which she referred.

I seldom actually see Patricia, she gets on quietly with her writing and I fall into step at the times at which she lifts her head from the typewriter and is mulling over the next step and the practicalities of proof reading, printing and binding. When I do see her we sit at her dining table, I prop up the microphone and she sorts through the things she wants to show me. We generally meet in the mornings, and do so at times which don't interfere with writing time or art classes. I get the strong impression that Patricia has mastered time and space in such a way that the boundaries are clearly defined and so the centres are tranquil and relaxing. Although she shows next to no curiosity about why I am interested in her and her work, I'm never quite sure who's researching who.

### **My meetings with other self-employed actors**

Angela, Alan, Freda and Patricia are the self-employed actors I have come to know best and spend most time with. Prior to meeting them I had developed ties with other newly self-employed people, and had involved them in some semi-structured interviews. I felt that there was a lot to be uncovered about what goes on in the worlds of self-employed people, but that this suspicion was informed by my own past experiences. I wanted to see if I was merely imagining some of the problems, for example, or if I was looking back upon my own experiences with a sort of horror or relief only possible from a safer and distant vantage point. So I was interested first and foremost in establishing whether or not I was 'barking up the right tree' or indeed if there really was a tree up which to bark. I felt that this was particularly necessary in the light of the up-beat and optimistic pictures being painted of self-employment in the region by the glossy County Council brochures. Granted, most stated that the percentage of people entering into self-employment here is lower than the national average, but that was not my concern. I wanted to know if we were now growing entrepreneurs here, so I thought I'd better root around the seed bed. My primary suspicion was that being self-employed was a potentially isolating experience, and that existing in isolation is problematic, in any sphere. To succumb to isolation in self-employment is risky for economic reasons as well, after all to fail to interact in this sphere is to fail to do business.

This suspicion about being isolated was borne out of my memories of endless hours working in my studio, days when the telephone never rang, and days when I felt that there was no-one to talk to, to mull over a problem with or share a dilemma. It seemed to me that in the very much more social world of the undergraduate, I had become sensitive to the

stark contrast of my present and my past, the social and the isolated. However, I had taken on board the idea that we are to a greater or lesser extent socially constructing ourselves through our interactions with others, interactions that fed us with, or mirrored, a sense of ourselves. I could reflect upon those interactions I had had during my years as a self-employed designer, and remember them as distinct exchanges, some positive or nurturing and some negative, confidence-shaking experiences. I remember the gaps between interactions, the gaps seemed to be vast stretches of time in which I was waiting for the next experience of human contact, gaps in which what I was, was to some extent, defined by the last contact.

I don't trust my memory to give some measurement to these gaps, but I am sure that they more or less disappeared as an undergraduate. Where there had been acres of space punctuated with some interaction or another, a telephone call about a contract or a meeting with a client, now as a student the field blurred into a sort of scrub of fleeting but constant interactions with many others, with similar or identical issues, shared deadlines, sentences that referred to shared experiences. Now tables were lost in the middle of a gathering of people, whereas before there was a desk or a drawing board between me and an economically significant other.

My first port of call to begin my explorations was one of the local Enterprise Agencies, where I was given a short list of new businesses in the county. My second was attending the local Business Club's monthly meeting which provided me with several business cards and contacts, so my sample developed from both these routes. Thirdly I picked up a brochure of new businesses in the North East, produced by the TECs and

Business Links. Sonya was my first contact, I met her at the Business Club as she was introduced as a new member. Sonya was receiving support from the Enterprise Allowance at that time, and was developing her business as a curtain maker. She had had a shaky start, attending the Enterprise Agency training courses twice before managing to launch into business. She had suffered some ill health and lacked the confidence to apply for work, so she began curtain making as a way of breaking back into work without having to go through what for her were traumatic interview experiences. As she was developing the business very tentatively and slowly, at the time we met, most of the work she had done had been for either relatives or friends of the family. She and her partner were about to be married and had moved out to a quiet spot in the country where Sonya based her work. It's one of a single line of terraced houses in the middle of nowhere, and working from the living room Sonya can look up and out onto open fields. She hoped in the near future to start a family, and in the meantime was not ambitious about her work, content with making a reasonable profit but confident that the household did not depend upon it.

It was, I felt, ideal to start off the interviews with Sonya, as she was in a line of business with which I was very familiar. As she discussed her work and assessed its level of quality and the type of clients she was aiming for I was able to tell from looking at her work the market at which it was pitched. In addition I knew well the hours and hours of hand stitching involved in making some of the items, and the problems involved with making bespoke items for clients. Since that first interview our paths have crossed on quite a few occasions at the Business Club, and I have watched Sonya appear to grow in stature as her confidence has



increased. Where once she was quiet and timid she now speaks out at the meetings - meetings which are generally a sea of dark grey suits.

Fiona, an artist, wasn't interested in the Business Club scenario, but wanted to develop an existing skill into a business, enabling her to stay at home with her youngest son when he was born. She had been a teacher, but felt that she should give her son greater attention than she had been able to afford the other children when they had been born, and besides, she said, if she returned to work she would have had to pay so much in childcare and transport costs that it was hardly worth returning. Fiona has a clear idea of what she doesn't want to be. She describes business people as hard-hearted and stressed out, and she doesn't want to become like that. Her way of doing business is to amass stock and sell in the realm of craft fairs and through galleries. She specialises in painting traditional folk scenes, based on the fairs and gatherings in the county. She reproduces prints from her work and sells these, and the originals, back to the subjects of her study, the participants and audiences of the fairs, and tourists and browsers in the local galleries. In addition she paints portraits, but expresses a timidity about this side of her work. She points out that portraits are an interpretation not a photographic record, and she is always terrified that her interpretation will not meet the approval of the subject. The fear for Fiona manifests itself in a reluctance to take on commissions in the first place, and a hesitation, sometimes resulting in lengthy delays, in delivering finished works.

Just as Fiona has a distinct idea about what business people are supposed to be about, she has a clear sense that she falls outside this category, and indeed any other. Her perception of the way she is seen in her locality is that she is thought of as a bit of a crank and rather exotic for

being an artist. Fiona lives on a large estate in one of the newer 1950s to 1960s developments in the county. Her old velvet covered chairs and table, pictures and ornaments do seem to sit as uneasily as she does in such a square room with such light, straight walls. But she feels distanced from artistic communities which she says look down their nose on the sort of small scale work she does, and relate to each other through expensive magazines advertising expensive galleries, a far cry, she comments, from the North East. She feels in a sense neither local nor global, and misses the peer group support she enjoyed in her previous job as a teacher.

Rob, on the other hand, has no hankering for his past life in the Durham coalfields. He trained as an electrician and has maintained contacts with other ex-miners, most of whom have retrained in the construction sector. These contacts have been his readymade network, on the back of which he has developed a steady business wiring new houses on local developments. Like many of the people I interviewed, he liked being able to pick the times he worked, however, he added that the hours were long and there were some weeks when work wasn't ready to do so there was no income. He bases his office in his spare room and the van holds all his tools, which he points out is a bonus as that way he can be based at home without the house looking like a store room. The house when I arrive, despite two small children, is in pristine condition, and the only clues to Rob's self-employment are the van in the drive and the accounts spread all over the floor. The paperwork is Rob's biggest nightmare, and he explains to me that he should have learned to keep it up to date by now as that's how he can tell who hasn't paid him. He says he's killed two birds with one stone tonight by saving his accounts to do whilst we talk.

Brian and Eric are further casualties of North East large scale redundancies. They both decided to take long term hobbies as the basis for their businesses. Brian has developed his skills in smithying, and Eric invested his redundancy money in classic cars, which he hires out for special occasions such as weddings. Both are husbands and fathers, and are driven to provide for their families, at the same time taking as little risk as possible. Both feel confident in their knowledge about their work, but less so in the business side of things. For both Brian and Eric, the decision to turn to self-employment was influenced by the lack of appropriate work for them in the area, and by that they mean anything really that is reasonably well paid and secure. Brian's family are young and he is carving out a career for life, but for Eric, whose family is older, self-employment is the last career stage for him, and he hopes it will ease him slowly into retirement by his late fifties. As he says, it is flexible enough for him to work very long hours now and keep his overheads down by doing all his own car maintenance. This will reap dividends for him in the future as his redundancy money has given him a secure base, so now he works to provide himself and his wife with a comfortable retirement.

Thomas and Edward are also using past skills and interests to develop careers in self-employment, Thomas in specialist bespoke sports equipment and Edward in writing. Their families are older and now independent of them, and their overheads are covered as a result of redundancy payments. However, they are not looking towards retirement for some many years, and are dedicated to the task of succeeding in their respective businesses. It's not the money that's most important to them, but working at and developing the quality of their work. They are interested in credibility and perfection. That is not to imply that money isn't

an issue for them, to be paid well for good work is part and parcel of the job, and the same may be said for Brian and Eric, providing a good quality service and product is as important as being paid for it. All were timid about charging too much for their work, and very aware of their long term reputation. They all referred in one way or another to the adage that 'you're only as good as your last job.'

Being sufficiently valued for your work was what drove both Tony and John to go into self-employment. Tony and John are both in their early thirties, and their paths into self-employment differ considerably from those discussed above. Neither are local to the North East, but came here via the universities in the region. Graduating several years ago and pursuing their respective professions in science and computing, they left paid employment feeling that they had more scope for improving their careers, life choices and income if they struck out on their own. Part of their life choice was to remain in the North East, they both felt that there was more scope for them to be self-employed here than in the South of the country. Tony particularly felt that he had benefitted from the contacts he made whilst he was in paid employment, and that there was a gap in the market he could fill for those contacts. He has a wife and two small children, and made a point of stressing the other distinct advantage of being self-employed; being able to look after the children whilst his wife fulfilled her part-time teaching obligations. Tony has been astute in his networking practices, realising very early on that to be out of sight would be to be out of mind. To this end he has been proactive in developing regular informal meetings for fellow self-employed people, whether in his line of work or not. Indeed I made contact with Tony through another recently self-employed interviewee. John, however, like many of the people I spoke with, was finding networking quite a difficult task. He

explained, and many others explained, that to network was to have to share information with competitors, and he was typical of all these actors in his distrust of the business environment. This was reflected in the rather ambiguous way in which John and others described their businesses in the local Development Agency publications. On more than one occasion it took me some time to discover exactly what it was that people were doing. In these early stages many were doing a little of this and a little of that, remaining as flexible as possible and at pains not to rule anything out of their scope. I remember doing the same myself, it takes a fair amount of confidence to say "I don't do that", and a pretty good bank balance.

Craig was one of the few people I suspected of being an 'entrepreneur'. He was recently retired and designing bespoke furniture. This involved him visiting people's homes which he loved, he declared that he got quite a buzz out of meeting new people from the most hospitable to the trickiest of customers. He wasn't physically in the best of shape, but felt that retiring to a stretch of inactivity would do him more harm than good. A heart attack survivor he relished his new lease of life, and running a business was a way of legitimising his attempts to increase his socialising and covered the overheads as well. He was, he said, very much a manager, getting orders and designing furniture but never making it himself. He enjoyed the hassles of co-ordinating suppliers and makers with job deadlines. His office, he said, was the boot of his car, everything he needed was in there and so he could go out to customers anywhere. He advertised economically, a small classified advertisement in the local papers that covered the area he wished to work in, and this, so far, was generating enough business to, as he put it, keep him in red wine.

Martin had also retired, being offered a comfortable early retirement package a few years before launching into self-employment. Martin had initially taken part time work to supplement his retirement package, but had not felt happy working at a lower level than he had been at previously. He was delighted with the independence and increased esteem now that he was self-employed and only regretted not starting earlier. He is a business consultant specialising in industries similar to those he worked in throughout his employed career. Thus he has a wealth of experience to bring to the job, and is taking advantage of the trend for companies to buy in trouble shooters and specialist expertise as and when they need it. Like a lot of the people I spoke to Martin dislikes having to sell himself, and his ideal situation is to have a few long term contracts so that he has some idea of what his commitments are and doesn't have to be continually scouting around for work.

Fergus, in his early forties, isn't keen on having to scout around for work either, and in his first year of business has found things slower than he would have wished. However, he values the independence he has now, and his computer technology business is expanding all the time. Fergus also works from home, and if anything misses the opportunity to talk to peers about technical problems, he can't talk things over with the family as, he says, the issues and problems are just too complex. He's not worried about client's perceptions of him being tainted by his home working, as he says, the house name disguises this, and he has a business telephone line in. Besides, he is in a part of the city where business and residential accommodation merge. Fergus made a positive decision to start up on his own, as he felt that he wasn't able to take sufficient control over the use of his expertise at work. His wife wasn't at all keen and his father, never in a stable job himself, was horrified that

Fergus had relinquished the status, income and stability of employment to strike out alone. However, Fergus is determined to show them that he has made the right decision, and has every confidence that his particular field of expertise will remain in demand for the time being.

This couldn't be said of Maurice, who was tentatively developing a model-making business in the hope that it would bring in sufficient to meet the demands of a teenage family. He had retired at the same time as his wife, on the grounds of ill health, and decided that as they had always enjoyed arts and crafts they would try to develop a business in that area. When I found them they were still at the experimental stage, designing items to mass produce. They had not explored the market very much at all, and Maurice was timid about this part of their work. It was predominantly his job to visit the craft shops in the region, and he was finding it difficult to stand his ground, coming away with only a few sale or return orders on each outing. He had plunged into a sphere of work that was very different from his original employment, and was, as he said, very much learning on the job. I felt quite anxious for Maurice and his family, because at the time we first met they were going through a very steep learning curve that seemed to apply to every aspect of the business, and, in an obscure market were not feeling able to call on anyone to give them very specific advice. They are also, like Freda, quite geographically isolated, having bought an old small holding in an area easily cut off in bad weather.

Much more easily accessible but in perhaps an equally incongruous location for a business, is Sarah. Having been made redundant from a job she thoroughly enjoyed and then feeling disheartened with her next job, she left it and spent some time at home reassessing her options and waiting for the right job to come along. In the meantime she took up

jewellery making as a hobby to keep her occupied, and surprised at her creative success decided to develop her talents into a business. Sarah is in her mid thirties, married but with no children. She lives in a semi-rural estate on the outskirts of one of the smaller towns in the county, having her own transport is essential for her, whether employed or self-employed. She works from home in a spare room, and the house, in showroom condition, gives no clue that there is a craft industry operating there. Sarah sells at craft fairs in neighbouring counties, which involves long hours of travel and long days, especially in the summer months.

Travel of a rather different sort keeps Barry in business. He is a self-employed expedition leader, and offers his services to local authorities and the local tourist industries. When I met up with him he was designing activity break packages for the hotel trade to market to businesses. In addition he had bits and pieces of work from local leisure centres. Barry had recently left the armed services after many years training and running expeditions all around the world. He had not enjoyed his last few years where differences of opinion caused clashes, so on leaving the services he felt inclined to be his own boss, at least for a while. Barry is in his late twenties and married. He finds the support from his wife invaluable, not least because her job is paying the bills whilst he gets his business off the ground. The overheads are kept to a minimum as no space at all is needed for Barry to operate his business, he demonstrated this by showing me the cupboard under the stairs in which everything from climbing boots to filing tray are neatly stashed.

By contrast Rose's whole house it seems is taken over with her business. Rose is a single parent in her early thirties. She recently set up a childminding service, enabling her to remain at home for her own children



but bring in some income and some interest for her. She initially wanted to start up a private nursery, but was unable to obtain funds to purchase appropriate premises. Disappointed she none the less pursued the idea of childcare but on a more modest basis. She advertises her business in the local paper, and is in the list of new business start ups in the county, which is where I came across her. Childminding might be seen as not quite a business, falling into that grey area of employment which is difficult to define, and indeed being defined differently by the Department of Social Security. It was Rose's attitude to her business that convinced me that this was more than just an opportunity for a bit of extra cash. She had rearranged the entire ground floor of her house to make it child friendly, and had furnished it with toys and games for all ages. She spoke about the different needs the children had that she cared for and how she addressed these. Each child's parent or carer had a contract with her which she drew up at the outset of the minding period, and she took particular care that all details and arrangements were honoured and adhered to. Although working in her own home Rose felt that during the hours in which she cared for children other than her own she was definitely 'at work', and that if this coincided with her own children being at home they had to respect that and expect to be treated as the client's children were.

Jenny was equally professional in her approach towards her work, although she confined it to one area of the house. Jenny lives in a rural area of County Durham, surrounded by countryside that has a reputation for being harsh to live in in the winter. She was made redundant from a job in London, and moved to the North East of England to live with her new partner. She is in her fifties and, largely due to her age she feels, has been unable to find employment which in any way meets the standards of

work she was doing before. So she thought she'd try her hand at being self-employed. Always working in a management position she found it easy to manage herself, her office and her time. She works now as an information coordinator, although as she says herself the title is ambiguous, she is another actor who finds it difficult to explain to me or to clients what she actually does.

Briony and Hilary live at opposite sides of the county. Both are developing self-employed roles as community artists. Hilary specializes in painting, and Briony in textiles, and both of them combine the community arts side with creating their own artwork to sell. As community artists they work on projects with, for example, children in schools, or local teenagers at youth groups or in public settings such as hospitals. All work is project based so has a start and end date and a budget which is defined at the outset. Briony's husband is also self-employed, so they share the care for their daughter and have become accustomed to irregular periods of work and unpredictable days. Briony was made redundant at about the same as she fell pregnant so she has developed her business to maintain a lifestyle that is, to a large extent, home based. They are however, cautious, in this first year without a regular income, and miss Briony's stable job and the knowledge that at least the mortgage would always be covered at the end of the month. Hilary's husband works full time, and they are in the process of doing up an old house. Hilary's income from her last job is not missed too much, although it affects the rate at which the home improvements are carried out. Her steadily, if modestly, improving income from selling her work and running community arts projects is not however surplus, but covers the extra costs that Molly, their first child, has brought to the household.

Sally was 'in between' periods of self-employment when I first met her. She had had a successful catering business in the South of England but had given it up when her husband's work took them to the North East. As she explained, his job is more permanent and has promotion prospects, and she thought it would be easy enough to start up a catering business again. That said, she has had considerable problems finding suitable accommodation, business units required major expensive adaptations to satisfy health and hygiene regulations. Her dearest wish is to buy out the elderly cafe owner locally and develop a coffee shop and restaurant there. In the meantime she and her husband are looking for a house which would be easy and inexpensive to adapt so that she can start catering again from home.

Very much a 'local boy made good' Bill has also got his eye on a shop, and has expanded the hardware side of his business through spotting a lucrative looking shop about to go onto the market and taking it over. The shop was trading in hardware and building supplies and Bill had been using it to purchase stock for his carpentry work. When the owner started to talk of retiring it seemed too good an opportunity to miss so Bill bought up his supplier. Now Bill has one shop and still goes out to work for clients on site, and is on the threshold of further expansion. At the time we met he was worrying a little about having to take on staff and how he was going to manage having to be in three places at once. This is Paul's problem too, as he has started a picture framing business and has taken up a site at a local market to sell frames and pictures. He is committed to spending the market days on his stall and at the same time wants to be out and about getting supplies and making the frames up. He'd also like to be looking at other market places as he feels he's doing well enough during the tourist season but feels that his sales will plummet during the

early new year. Paul's wife works with him occasionally but most of her time is taken up in part time employment. Bill's wife has nothing at all to do with his business, and Bill informed me that he would never consider discussing anything about the business with her, it is his responsibility and his alone to make the right decisions and bring in sufficient income for the family.

Timothy and his wife take a mutually supportive role, Tim's wife is a bookkeeper and keeps Tim's accounts up to date. She is on the verge of starting her own business in antiques restoration. Both of them feel that this will complement Tim's business, which is clockmaking and repairing. This line of work entails a large amount of restoration work too, and their markets will be similar. Tim was made redundant several years ago, and has taken quite a relaxed approach to developing his business. He has enrolled on courses to improve his craftsmanship skills and has developed a passion for clocks as he has learned about them. He has, with his wife, spent plenty of time at auctions and antique fairs in the region, and so has gained a good grasp of the market. This experience has enabled him to make some wise purchases and assess what for him is worthwhile work and what is not. He chuckles at the traders in this field who dash around from one end of the country to the other after a deal and a profit. His perspective is that slow and steady wins the race, and if he proceeds with caution and doesn't risk his capital, he makes a fair living.

### **Summary**

These people make up the group of actors that I have spoken to in the course of the research and will talk about in the coming chapters. They come from a variety of walks of life, some heading towards retirement and some starting off and wanting families. Most, but not all, have used the

Enterprise Agencies to get started and for advice now and then, but few have gone so far as to seek advice from the Training and Enterprise Councils or Business Links. They are all in their early years of self-employment, finding their feet, their market and their way of being self-employed. In this early stage there is a mixture of optimism and pessimism, and quite a bit of uncertainty. Most have chuckled at the idea that they are entrepreneurs, indeed some have been horrified. At this stage for the majority of them, to make a living, cover their overheads and build a reputation, a network and a steady source of work are the issues that keep them awake at night. But words like 'entrepreneur' and 'regeneration' are not part of their vocabulary. In the next chapter, which aims to look a little closer at their hopes and aspirations, some of their voices and their own vocabularies begin to emerge.

### **Chapter Three, Looking Forwards**

This chapter is concerned with gaining a deeper understanding about the actors in this study. It aims to address some of the more usual questions that are asked of self-employed people, the first being why they chose to go into self-employment. The issues raised by this question have to do with what these people were doing before they were self-employed, as well as what their dreams and aspirations are or were. So we are exploring a little of their histories, in a sense both a 'real' past and what they felt, thought, or imagined their futures, as self-employed to be. Bound up with this, then, is the way in which they now view their pasts prior to their self-employment. It has not been my intention to separate out these 'moments of thinking about moments of thinking' or to come up with some typology for them, rather I have aimed to present the perspectives of these self-employed people as they have emerged. Because I want to deal with some of the most commonly asked questions here, I have sorted the chapter into 'questions' which I use as headings, but which should not be assumed to be scripted questions which were actually ever, or always, asked during the study. Following the 'why' question, the chapter continues by looking at the dreams and aspirations of actors. Then, as a stark contrast, the very down to earth issue of money. Finally, as this contrast leaves a sort of gap between the ideal and the real, I have looked at how some actors have experienced, made do or struggled with bringing the real and ideal together. So it is the aim of the chapter to begin to move more deeply into the private lives of the self-employed, especially through their own thoughts as articulated here, and through these to apprehend a very real world which may both enable and constrain their fruition.

### Why self-employment?

The first and most often asked question is why go self-employed? Certainly in the literature about small businesses discussed in chapter one this has been an opening question. However, if the question isn't asked, the reasons are slow in coming, actors weren't falling over themselves to explain what drove them into self-employed careers. I have touched on some of the reasons with some of the actors whilst introducing them, now we look in a little more depth as they explain their reasons. I have grouped them for easier reading but am not classifying them as such, although clearly there are those who have chosen and those for whom self-employment was more or less thrust upon them.

Bill, Anthony, Barry and Fergus all decided that self-employment offered them more scope than remaining in their current jobs. Bill had become accustomed to being taken on and laid off and had already seen that there was scope for him outside employment as he'd begun to get asked to do bits of work 'on the side': *"Well you get that much on the side, like 'can you hang a couple of doors for me?' and then eventually when I got laid off I just carried on, and then thought I'd start my own business ... it's all private, I don't like working for builders, they don't pay more than a certain amount a day."* Anthony also felt that in addition to lacking security in employment he was constrained in his scope to develop his skills and earning potential. *"I was pissed off with [my employer] as there was no prospect of a full time job, also I felt that I could make myself more responsive to the market and take on multiple contracts ... I don't think I'm taking a risk career wise, I mean for example just look at the formal job market."*

Having completed a lengthy training and service in the armed forces, Barry had had enough of being told what to do, "*... I liked the idea of being my own boss, I don't like working for others and being looked over, ... the main thing is at the end of the day, over decisions on how to make the business work, I only have myself to blame. It was a risk to come out of the forces, I was on for twenty two years so I had twelve years left and a pension ... but I'm always of the opinion that if you don't try something you never know, and you may always regret it.*" Fergus was of the same opinion, for him it was "*... frustration at not being in control of the things I was required to do...*" although his family, as discussed in chapter two, were not at all of the same mind.

Barry and Fergus, Bill and Anthony are all applying to their self-employment the same skills and knowledge gained in their previous work. It's a bit different for Patricia, Maurice and Tim, all of whom, although applying previous work experiences to their self-employment are doing something entirely different. So too are Sarah and Alan. We touched on Sarah's reasons for self-employment in chapter two - she had taken up jewellery making as something to keep her occupied whilst unemployed. She had not initially imagined making her hobby into a business. Her approach was that she enjoyed her new found skill, and preferred it to the risk of entering another job where she might be undervalued or not get on with staff. Having been made redundant from a job in which she had managerial status she had tried another job but found the experience terribly disappointing as she had had to take a position with less responsibility and amongst a workforce who weren't at pains to welcome her.



Alan didn't know what to do when he was made redundant. A skilled manual worker he could wait indefinitely for a contract and end up working anywhere in the country. He remembered his wife saying to him that he was always ill, and that triggered a curiosity for him in health, initially his own and then others. His ambition for the last few years has been to avoid having to go to a doctor until after the millennium, and so far he's managed not to. Alan's curiosity led him to retrain in remedial massage, and it simply didn't cross his mind to pursue it as a career in any way other than through self-employment. Alan and Sarah are of a similar age to Barry, Fergus, Bill and Anthony, they all have many decades of work ahead of them and a decade or two behind them. Patricia, Maurice and Tim, however, are at the end of their working careers, being made redundant or taking early retirement in their fifties. They feel unable to get back into the employment market.

Tim is now a clockmaker. He had been working in a semi-skilled manual job in the same company since leaving school. He has lived in the same area most of his life, his wife still works and their offspring left the nest long ago. For Tim a series of chance events led to clockmaking. The works buildings and contents were made redundant at the same time as Tim was, and he walked out of the place for the last time with a clock under his arm, salvaged from the shop floor. Months and months of fiddling around with it, and no job offers coming, Tim enrolled on a course at the local college in metal work. This gave him the higher skills he felt he needed for clock making and repairing, and a year later he started his business. It is his work and his passion, and his house clicks and chimes with hundreds of clocks of all shapes and sizes, his workshop brims with what I can only describe feebly as 'bits'.

The same cannot be said for Maurice's home, which gives little clue to the mould making going on behind the scenes. Maurice took early retirement from a demanding managerial role and is still finding his feet in self-employment. He explained that he had always been interested in crafts but had never had the opportunity to do anything creative. This had prompted him to start up a business mass producing models and hand painting them. Maurice's concern was to be able to support the family and their home, bought when he was still employed but expensive to maintain. Unlike Tim and Patricia he didn't feel that he could manage to maintain the family's lifestyle unless he could turn the business into a financial success, and his outlays on equipment and materials had not yet been met with the equivalent in sales when we first met.

Patricia had other reasons for wishing her self-employment to be a success. She was, as discussed chapter two, devastated at being made redundant. Having worked all her life she then had to ask of herself what she could do to fill the years. The sorts of questions Patricia asked herself were, what shall I do?, what can I do?, and what do I like doing?. Assessing the skills she had developed in employment she thought first about counselling but looking into this felt that Durham was 'over counselled' and besides she wouldn't, according to the local council, be able to do that from home. She decided that she didn't want staff, and that if she took premises she would need a secretary: *"So, I enjoy writing so I said well if I produce books that's a social help ... I had worked in local government and written papers for conferences and things."* Patricia is one of the older actors and so like Tim and Maurice self-employment will be their last career. However, Patricia is thinking well ahead, and has taken her family circumstances into account in deciding what her self-employed work should be. As we got to know one another it transpired

that Patricia was going to art classes; *"I started that when I was made redundant because I had no hobbies, my work took up all of my time ... I always try to keep that to go to and I'm doing quite well, but you know painting is much less easy to put down if you're interrupted, whereas writing is easier to put down and go back to, so if my husband needed care I would be able to stop what I was doing and see to him and nothing would be lost."*

Plenty of us looked at how we wanted to spend our time with our children as well as earn a living or at least supplement the household income, indeed it is often a topic in the popular press as well as in social policy literature that households need two incomes now to cover their expenses. I was astonished to find so early on in my research someone planning to start a family and developing her self-employed career anticipating this. Even more astonished to find that her line of work was so similar to mine when self-employed. Sonya, as we discussed in chapter two, was timid about employment and felt safer developing her own business at her own speed. She hoped to start a family: *"I want to have children, and so it's one of the advantages of working from home, and we won't miss my income too much. If I still have spare time when I have my children then I'll carry on, and it's something that's easy to start up again."* I also knew that I wanted children one day, and that I wouldn't be happy leaving them with a childminder all day long when they were only weeks old. I imagined myself having infinite hours in infinite days of sleeping babies who never cried when the telephone rang and never needed feeding when you were in the middle of making something. I thought I could do it all, and I wasn't the only one to think so.

Hilary and Briony are in similar kinds of work, both work as community artists whilst coming to the roles from different specialisms. Hilary does some work as an interior designer specialising in children's rooms, and also designs and produces artworks and cards for local shops. She gave up her full time employment: *"It coincided with wanting to start a family ... we're not totally dependent on this although we do need it with having Molly. And I'm tied because I don't want to put her in nursery."* Briony was made redundant and found it a natural progression into parenthood to build on her skills and maintain her contacts from her previous job, filling in with term-time projects in schools and vacation-time parenting and making jewellery. Briony's husband is also self-employed, so they have converted their attic into a studio, and take it in turns either to work up there in the peace and quiet, or compromise downstairs with their toddler.

Fiona had come to the decision to start up as a self-employed artist when she had her third child. She had been in full time employment and taken maternity leave. But when it was time to go back to work she felt that this time she shouldn't, she should give her youngest the time and attention she had not been able to give to the other two: *"After having Josie I didn't want to go back out to work and a childminder would be too expensive, and besides we'd need another car."* For Fiona the quality of life as a family was more important than a greater and predictable income. For Angela, quality of life was also an important issue, although, as we discussed in chapter two, she felt that due to her age and having children she was unemployable: *"I would get a job but I do tend to view myself as unemployable ... I'm female and old with children ... I'm over-qualified to do half the things that you can just walk into and under-qualified to do the things that would give me the income that I would like from a job, so what do you do? And the other thing is are there jobs in this area that I would*

*want to do? ... I could have walked into many jobs that I didn't particularly want ..."* Angela felt that going into self-employment offered her the only opportunity to satisfy her own and her children's expectations, but was acutely aware that she was also risking this quality of life for them all: *"I either sink or swim, and if I sink it's a long way down. I don't mind going a long way down myself but I don't want to take my kids down with me, because they suffered enough when I was at University ... how much more should they suffer because all of that's meant to be for making a better life for them."*

This is not an exhaustive account of why these people are now self-employed, and I found that their many reasons might differ in prominence from day to day, and besides there is plenty of scope for post hoc rationalization. Very few of the cases discussed above involved one resoundingly clear motive for going into self-employment, many had a dozen or so very good reasons for doing so, and a dozen more for not. Their dreams and aspirations gild these reasons as they speak about them.

### **What were those dreams?**

This section looks at the dreams, visions and goals that some of the actors talked of during these early years of self-employment. It is worth noting that those interviewed only once or twice did not explicitly talk of such dreams, but of course we didn't have such lengthy conversations, the sort of relaxed exchanges that dip in and out of more personal and abstract revelations. The core actors did, however, and it seemed, were modest in their dreams. Of course there is a lot of scope for post hoc rationalization, and it seemed to me that once their self-employed lives were up and running dreams and visions disappeared in the muddled

hum-drum of getting on with the job of self-employment. It was as if the imagination about what self-employment would promise had evaporated.

The modesty of the dreams and goals may be put down to the limits that were self-set by actors, as they felt that there was only so much scope in working from home and alone. Most of them were cautious about investing in their businesses, and kept their overheads to a minimum. Patricia made it quite clear that she didn't want to employ anyone, and that in deciding what business to start up it should be something that she could operate from home. Angela liked the look of the business starter units at the edge of her town but felt that she certainly could not afford one. Anthony spoke of the benefits of working from home in that not only could he be there to share in the care of the children but he could keep his overheads to a minimum. Sally too was holding out for the right place to start her self-employed catering business again and despite looking at several business units was waiting for some cheaper option, either to take over an existing premises or find another house that she and her husband could convert.

My dream when I started off making the wall-hangings was that they would be so much of a success that I could increase the prices sufficiently to work less hours. I had coveted the idea of working flexible hours, having more freedom to spend time in the garden if the sun was shining, and exploit my other interests. Making the wallhangings was labour intensive and their price was never sufficient to cover the time it took to make them. The dream changed when the interior designing side of the business was doing well, and at its peak my aim was to be able to leave a sound business for my children to take on, or at least a saleable business. When business was quiet I dreamed of an endless stream of customers.

and when it was busy I dreamed of taking on staff to give me time out. I didn't dream about wealth in terms of money but certainly dreamt of having more time.

Angela explained her desire for a similar freedom: *"Well I did a lot of freelance work before anyway and I was aware of the freedom that that gave me - I like short term intense projects, I get a big buzz out of short term intense work, if you take something, sort of, this is what you've got to do everyday for the rest of your life ... I haven't got that kind of commitment."* But she also had a vision for her business at the outset, which has now got a bit lost along the way: *"I don't want to sit and be nobody forever, I want to expand things, I want the opportunity to expand things and I wanted that vision at the outset ... Because none of the people I did the course with they didn't actually want to be businesses, they wanted to be self-employed, and I think there's a subtle difference in attitude from the outset. I wanted to run a business which would expand as businesses expand and I think the key to that, because like I said I'm coming with no capital was then you've got to be flexible, to have an edge over existing businesses and the edge that I felt I had was starting small..."* On our last day together Angela again explained what it was she felt she wanted from her work: *"... to be doing something that I get some pleasure from doing, to be earning enough money doing it to not have to struggle, I don't particularly want to be fantastically rich but it would be nice not to have to think about money every day, and to be actually producing goods that I could take pride in and something that I could sit back afterwards and think OK it wasn't perfect 'cause it's never going to be perfect but it's good ..."*

I realise as I read through Angela's dreams of freedom that mine were more idealistic, even romantic, than I have initially portrayed them to be. Angela's dreams have jogged for me a distant memory of a few days off work which I spent quite idly with a friend, sitting on a swing in a park overlooking the Cotswold valleys, every bit the country which Laurie Lee describes. We swung and talked and imagined ourselves running businesses in which we took time out on sunny days to ... swing and talk.

Freda, although always striking me as so down to earth and practical, has her dreams too, and has thought quite hard about them. She has what she might describe as a creative streak, and in her head has imagined making beautiful pieces of leather work. She articulates her dream in very practical ways, in other words in terms of how she could make a living from such creations: *"Well I'd like to go for the upmarket because I enjoy doing it more, and I think there is that choice to do that. We feel that if we can get to America, you know get our products to America, that we would do quite well up there because they seem to go for that sort of product, they want the best for their animals and that. There are people here but most people I mean I shouldn't say this but personally, I mean we've got a dog yet she hasn't got one ... but there are people you know that just idolize their animals and they'd well you know money's no object and they'd go and pay ... Yeah I think like if, er, we can get to the top end of the market then we've sort of thought about advertising in like the top end magazines ..."*

This needs some explaining; whilst doing her saddlery repairs Freda has developed her skills and designed some decorative products for animals which she feels would sell in wealthy areas. She would like to develop it as a mail order side to the business: *"I prefer doing these things because*



*they're not so big, um, they take time if you're doing more detailed stuff and that but it's sort of, um, I think we'd make more money ... you're getting bigger money in although you're increasing you're materials and things ... I mean I enjoy doing these things and Martin says you know well if we do move the work back out to the house ,you know, use the barns up there and the Internet and maybe plug that side it wouldn't matter that we were in the middle of nowhere. "* We talked about these ideas the first time we met, but in the day-to-day business of maintaining the bread and butter side of the business the idea has got no further a year later. It is still there, still her dream but Freda finds little time to develop and explore its potential at the moment.

Alan's vision is one which constantly underpins his work, and that vision is to make the world a healthier place: *"Some people would say, I mean, I think this has always been the way with it, they would say their ambition is to win the lottery, in truth my ambition is to heal people. I want to make a living at the same time you know, obviously you know, otherwise I'll not be able to heal people you know, that's what I would position as being me goal."* He has a personal conviction that we could all be healthier if we just looked after our bodies better and ate more healthily. He explains that it involves understanding what is good to eat and what is good for one's own body. When Alan sees clients, and indeed at any opportunity, he talks about diet and health. His vision is unapologetically idealistic and audibly omnipresent in his work. Yet on a day-to-day basis his ambitions are not only more modest but don't sit so easily with his ideals. He feels that he is in the wrong location for his business to do well and attract sufficient appropriate clients, but as he says: *" I always believe that if you can do people good, people will find you, even if you live like somewhere out at Wolsingham or like, that, you know, people will search you out, but*

*it's how to get through to people to let them know that you're there ... and in ten years time say? I would get myself customers to the extent that at the time I would decide on the right place, the right location ... I think I would want to be in a more affluent area you know, you know I haven't really decided at this point in time you know, I haven't got it down on paper my direction on that you know, but I've got my goals, I mean I want to do some more of my poetry, I feel as though I've changed somewhere in the physical type of work that wasn't truly me, but I'm moving on to more towards what I want to do ..."*

Even at this stage we see that these dreams separate into different strata, a bit like the playground and pub games of 'what I would do if I won the lottery / if I could change the world ...' and the shorter term / within reach / graspable dreams bound by what is perceived to be possible. Angela doesn't want to be fantastically rich, she just wants to be better off than she was before and satisfied that she has progressed with her children to a more comfortable way of living. Freda shelves her dream in the hum-drum of daily tasks as something she will, she really will, get around to looking at one day. And Alan realises that for him to make the world a healthier place he will have to change locations one day, but he will patiently wait until a big enough client base shows him that he can afford to do that. What measures what is possible is, often for many of these actors, money.

### **And what about money?**

One of the obvious questions around the subject of self-employment has to do with money, and although money matters have not been a specific focus of the research, monetary concerns are an integral part of self-employment. This section of the chapter looks first at what are quite

generalised money problems or concerns for many of the actors, and continues with some of their perspectives. This brings up a frequent problem, that of how actors price their work. We then look at the economies, trials and errors, and compromises some of these actors make.

Most of the actors started out as self-employed through using the services, advice and funding of the Enterprise Agencies in their area. Funding arrangements have changed in recent years, so some have received regular payments and others have received grants at different stages. For all actors, whether assisted at some stage by the Enterprise Agency or not, the bottom line is to generate their own income from their own work. The pressure to do this is greater for some than others, Briony, for example, explained that: "*... by April time that was the end of my enterprise allowance, but things picked up and I'd got that, although I had been thinking that I'd have to look for a job ... just I think the insecurity of not knowing where your next piece of work is coming from really...*" Angela, although feeling unemployable, actually did apply for a job, and Freda knew the feeling too: "*... there are a lot of people who have gone through the system like that, and it's not just you, they said that they had their busy periods and then it goes slack and they think oh God I've got to get a job, well, I mean, I've been through all that, you get to a stage when you think what am I doing all this for, there's no work coming in, I've got all this hassle, there are bills to pay and I'll just go and apply for a job ...*"

There is more time for some to generate their own income, those who have had redundancy packages, and those whose self-employment brings a second income into the household. Hilary comments that her family are not totally dependent on her income, although it funds the expenses of a

toddler. Tim has been prudent with his investments, so feels financially secure as long as he doesn't take any risks with his business.

Patricia felt that it was important to make a living out of her work, although at the outset she would have been happy to break even. To obtain her funds from the Enterprise Agency she had to show that what she was doing was economically viable, and as it entailed writing and producing a book she had to stand the costs of the initial production and marketing, and be able to show the Agency that what she had done had indeed started to show a reasonable turnover. This she was able to do and so, although with modest aspirations at the outset, as she put it: *"I'm determined, and I shall have to make a profit eventually. I do make money, but at the moment it always goes back into the business for stock."* She found it difficult to put a value on her work: *"I thought I can't charge more than £6.50 because I'm an unknown, and it's a limited market as a specialist subject and you go into Smiths and see blockbusters for £1. I should charge three times as much they say, but I couldn't do that."* The trouble is, she said, that once she had priced a book for the catalogues she was obliged to stay with that price until it was time to print a new edition and put a new listing in the catalogue. Since Patricia discussed this, the first time we met, she has produced new editions, and taken the opportunity to increase the price, although only very modestly. She summed up her thoughts about making a reasonable income: *"I don't write to make money, because I don't need money, I've got as much as I need, and yet that's the thing too, I don't feel, one can't do this without making it into a business because otherwise why would anyone bother to buy plays if you were always giving them away? And it wouldn't be fair to other people who genuinely need the money from their work. I need from*

*the business the satisfaction of knowing that other people want my work, and not because I'm giving it away..."*

Early on in conversations with Freda it became clear that pricing, putting a value on her work, was a difficult issue, and the preoccupation with this was evidenced on a number of occasions. Her first reference to this was whilst talking about how to make business decisions: "... we have considered upping the prices because I think when I started they were a bit low, but we're gradually creeping them up and keeping them happy with that you know the, [customers] you know they're happy with the work so they don't mind paying the extra, but it's just how you feel you know sort of how can I charge that and really it's the pricing it's the thing that gets the most complicated for me ... I suppose you sort of think is it worth it?, but then they'd have to go out and buy new anyway and you know it sort of balances up with something you, you know you're putting the work into it, I'm now getting round to thinking that way, that you're putting the work into it and it's up to them, if they want to say 'no I don't want it done'. I suppose I think of everybody as friends and feel guilty charging them a lot of money, which is not the right way to go about it." She continues describing how her train of thinking about this has moved her on to be more businesslike as she brings her time and overheads into the picture: "It's funny but I mean well now I'm getting to the stage where I think well no, that has cost me so much in materials, I've put that much time into it, they've got a good item, or, they couldn't have used it if I hadn't done the work on it, they'd only have had to pay x amount more, so um, I'm gradually getting the confidence to actually charge it. Because you know a lot of people do say 'that much?' but I mean um not about us but you do hear them talking about other people you know ... and I'm thinking well yes but the work that's gone into it, you know when they're saying it about

*somebody else you think well no that's right, they should be charging that, but when it's you you sort of think mm well can I charge that much, but er as I say, I'm getting to the stage now where we've gone through the price list and we are upping it, and you know we can't do it for nothing otherwise we're not going to be in business."*

But this is not the end of it, as later in the year Freda and I discussed marketing and it came back to prices: *"... like this muzzle, in the shops they'd pay about £7 but I've said £25 and she's happy with that, but I mean the leather costs more and you're doing it exactly how they want it so um, I mean, we're starting to up prices now ... but see this bridle, I mean I said £80 to him and I thought that was dear, but really for a made-to-measure bridle you're looking at over £100 so I shall have to go through all my prices and make sure we up them because I mean they can go and get a cheaper one if they want but what's the point of us putting the work in if we're not going to gain anything?"* Freda has often worked through her thoughts on pricing with me, and later in the year on another day spent with her, she was testing the water with one of her customers, who is also now a go-between for her and a local shop she does repairs for. Concerning leather bags:

*Freda: "... I did one for £30 and I don't think I charged enough."*

*Customer: "No, I don't suppose you did, especially when you look at what they cost to buy, they're really expensive, you could have put another nought on the end."*

*Freda: "The trouble is you get better as you go along, you realise what you should be charging ..."*

*Customer: "Well as long as you make something on what you do ..."*

Freda: *"Well yes, you cover your materials and a little bit, but not a fortune."*

Customer: *"... but you should charge more ..."*

Freda: *"Well I'm making up a price list so I'll give it to you and see what you think ..."*

Income is one side of the money issues, on the other is expenditure. Actors were cautious, even conservative, about overheads, and Freda is no exception. There are other expenses to be taken into account as Freda pointed out above, there are the costs of the materials, and one bridle doesn't cover the cost of a whole hide. *"... we just start off with hide and we strip the leather off you know, we can make things exactly as they want them ... it's just that when you get the orders you know you have to order things in, when you're ordering a lot and you know you've only got a small job to do and then you've still got to find the money to pay the big bill at the end of the day, although you've still got the stock there to use when any other orders come through you're sort of thinking well is this worth it, you know ..."* The problem of buying in bulk is not a new one, and buying in at the best price from the most convenient supplier and so on requires what is defined in business terminology as 'sourcing'. We all 'shop around' for certain items, and congratulate ourselves when we feel we have found a source for what we want at what we feel to be a good price. And we surely all know of those who drive for miles out of their way to fill their petrol tanks at a cheaper rate. Freda's problem is that she has to buy her leather as whole hides and then translate the hides into bridles, stirrup leathers and so on. It will take several bridles and stirrup leathers to recoup her initial outlay. I was in the same position when self employed and buying lining fabrics. After the first few jobs I realised that I would have a far greater profit margin if I bought bolts of fabric, say 70 metres at

a time, but it takes the sale of a fair few pairs of curtains to meet that initial outlay.

And there are the advertising costs, without which perhaps some of the work simply won't come in. Advertising costs are a bone of contention for Freda and Martin: *"It's just trying to justify the cost of the advertising, I mean it's expensive if you only get one order off it ... [addressing Freda] but you get such a small response, if you're lucky you'll cover the cost of the advertising and you might make yourself a couple of pennies out of it but really you'll only break even."*

Alan has felt that he has been caught out on advertising too, and that this is a major cost to his business and constrains other forms of spending. And like Freda he is concerned about how he sets his level of pricing, and doesn't want to put people off by charging too much. It is worth remembering at this point that all these actors are in their first few years of self-employment, and are still establishing themselves, their reputations and their ways of doing things. Alan compares himself with others in similar businesses: *"... I think it's round about the same as what I'm charging, there's a physiotherapist across the road that charges £18 and the hairdresser was talking to him and he used to be a sales rep before. He's thinking of packing it in because he's not getting very much trade at all ... The other I know of is charging about £20 ... but what I'm charging people can still be a lot you know ... It's maybes better leaving it up to them, sometimes people have given us a little bit more, but it's pushing people at the beginning you see..."* And Alan is reluctant to charge more for working outside normal working hours: *"I just charged him the normal and what I was doing was adding £5 on for going to a house, but I intend not to do that with this one because it's not out of my way, plus the fact*



*that it's like a good kind of advertising you see."* Alan said that he advertises himself as available twenty four hours of the day, so I asked him what he would charge if he was called out late at night or in the small hours of the morning. *"Well probably double I would think because if they wanted me, well then I would charge double, but if I went at say eight o'clock then I would just charge the same, I wouldn't really charge more for unsocial hours because you see you're always looking at areas not to put people off."* For Alan money, although tight at the moment, is not the motive for working: *"... the view of being financially well off but at the same time helping people, and that's most important, I'd rather go bankrupt than harm anybody."* I wondered if Alan practised a redistributive policy with his pricing, as he was so concerned about what people could afford, but this was not the case: *"The most important customer I have is a retired chief executive, and you won't get wealthier than that, and I mean he's going to mix with the type of people that it won't affect them money wise them coming to see us, but at the same time you don't want to say that's £30 when it's really just £20 because you'll easily put people off by that you've always got to charge the same amount ... Actually people like that you don't want to charge excessive amounts because they could be a good advert for you."* I worry, perhaps unnecessarily, about the way Alan values his work and feels that others do, but there again it took me a little while to realise that it was no compliment to my work if people came to me because I was cheap. How actors assessed the price or value they put on their work was a complex series of compromises between what they needed to live, what they felt the market could stand, how much time a job took, what the overheads were, and so on. There are in the world of business and accounting some elaborate formulas for calculating this, but here actors tended to take a more ad hoc and intuitive approach. Alan

tended to make all the compromises himself, drastically curtailing his lifestyle and leisure pursuits to fit his income.

Rob, Sonya, Martin and Briony also had concerns about pricing or valuing their work. Rob found one of the tricky parts of being in business was having to ask for money, which he said he should really do at the start of a job, and as he put it: *"Sometimes I underprice myself and undervalue myself."* Martin felt he had similar weaknesses in business, but didn't feel that it was himself that he undervalued: *"I tend to underprice, which is one reason why now I tend to go away at the end of an interview and think about the job, I forget how expensive things are to produce. I can price my time, and I know what scale I'm prepared to work within, but I do tend to forget overheads quite often ..."* I asked Briony if she felt that she put a fair price on her work: *"I do now ... at first I didn't know what to charge them, I thought no-one's going to pay ... but if I knew people had a lot more money I would charge more, and I'm charging £x a day now, and a year ago I wouldn't have done that, but now I think well if people want me then I'm prepared to do the work at that rate."* A little experience went a long way, as Sonya noted: *"Something that is getting easier now is discussing price, it really came down to having confidence in my ability ... and realising that people seemed to expect to pay for size not workload."*

Angela's pricing problems began before she had started trading: *"... because I wanted to be versatile, and because I only had a vague idea who my market would be, pricing, I mean pricing for me is on a varying scale, I mean for me I can't charge the same here as I can charge down the road. Now how do you put that in a business plan?"* Money was quite an issue for Angela in other respects as well. She was reluctant to plunge into business and come off income support fearing that should everything

fall through she would have lost her safety net. Angela felt that once off income support she would find it very difficult to get back on it again should she have to: *"If I have to go back on benefit, given my current relationship with benefit, there isn't a no man's land ... Half the time I'm not even skimming above it, I mean what I'm doing is hand to mouth, and I don't think my lifestyle is particularly extravagant ... I mean I suppose we do eat slightly better now."* Angela lives in rented accommodation, she has no collateral and no family back up if she runs out of money. In this respect she feels vulnerable, and unable to take the risks she assumes others might take. As she put it: *"I've become very aware that I've got no safety nets at all, I haven't got other people to say 'there Angela, you tried', I haven't got anyone to support me through the lean times by saying 'there, there Angela, here's £100, go and buy the kids some food and let it tide you over 'til you get some money in' ... and on the other hand you have that the benefit system has become so complex and so mealy-mouthed that you can't rely on that any more to be there as a safety net, you know you can ostricise yourself from it basically. So what do you do? You know I have this fear, it's almost a nightmare, I may never be able to go on benefit again ..."*

*"... and I started with a massive overdraft, my overdraft has gone down, the next obstacle was that I hadn't got equipment, but I have got equipment now without getting into debt. Until I get into a better position financially I don't want to incur more debt, that's not doubt about the business, it's just that I've been in debt and it's shit, I'd sooner build up a good record with the bank now, and now I want my bank manager to say 'well done' [to] me. But if I tried for a business loan and I struggled, I mean it's not as if I wouldn't repay it, or be able to repay it, it's that I'd rather not be in a position where the bailiffs could come and take my stuff. I'm*

*relatively happy, I'm not contented with it but I'm relatively happy with my financial situation which is ticking over ... If I was middle class, permanently, um, had come from a relatively wealthy family, then it's pretty much a lifestyle thing that you go to the bank and you ask for a loan, whatever it be for. But I've not come from that background, I haven't come from a background where that's the normal thing to do, somewhere at the back of my mind is the thought that large bank loans are for other people, because somewhere there's some collateral, and I thought well if I did this say for three years I'd be in a better position personally to go to the bank because I'd be able to say look I've done this and this, I'd have some background, and also a background of no debt. But again this is not because I've been to the bank and been refused a loan, it's not necessarily a real thing, it's another barrier that I've put up, another one of the little barriers."*

Despite Angela's concern not to overstretch herself financially, and her conviction that borrowing is sometimes a nasty experience and not for her, she does have ways of tempting herself into a more affluent lifestyle: *"I've done lots of girly things like buying makeup and things that I don't normally buy, it's very much what I'm thinking about at the moment ... it's all tied in with OK what do you want, and to me it's as important towards me as a business person as it is towards me as an individual, because once I get a taste for these things hopefully that will inspire me to work to earn more of them. Because I can only scrape by on being poor, but it's a long time now, and a lot of this was, well in order to be in business most of the successful people I know are quite greedy, or what I perceive to be greedy which gives them that edge to earn money and to seek and take up opportunities that perhaps a poor minded person wouldn't seek and take up ... I got so sort of depressed and morose that I decided it was time*

*to kick start it, well basically saying to myself this is what life is like when you've got money, you've tried once without money, you know that shit, but this is what life's like when you can go into Marks and Spencers and treat yourself to smoked salmon and go up to the Metro Centre and buy yourself lunch without feeling guilty about it!"*

So Angela tends to see the successful business people as the greedy ones, she doesn't see herself as greedy but feels that perhaps if she can set up the same desires and tastes and hungers in herself she will be motivated to earn what's needed to satisfy them. But no-one wants to be seen as greedy, as Alan said: *"When you're in business you're always looking for more ... you've got to have that greedy element ... some people look at it different ways, you always want more no matter who you are."* I asked Alan if he saw himself as greedy: *"No, but you've always got to look for more is another way of saying greedy, never satisfied."* Fiona put it this way: *"I couldn't be very business-like, and I can't be calculating with time, when people get into business it seems to take the warmth out of them. I wouldn't want to have that cold attitude, and I wouldn't want to reach burn out either."* This was Fiona's response to my asking her what she felt her weaknesses to be as a self-employed person. And to the same question Fergus had a similar if more positive response: *"I might not be a very good salesman. I find on occasions I'm doing work for people for nothing, I will help people out just for the satisfaction of getting the job done. I see other people whose minds switch to pounds, but I'm usually thinking about the technical problems."* And finally, if any bank manager readers are not already throwing their arms in the air in despair, Freda comments: *"I'm pleased with the work I do, I'm confident with that ... I mean that, well the end product is, well, I don't like parting with things because when I've put so much work into it I just want to put it up on the wall!"*

In discussing money issues this section has drawn on comments from many of the actors. After all, making money or earning a living is what they all have in common, though their levels of need may differ. I have touched on those differing levels of need as Angela, for example, needs security to finally cut herself off from Income Support, and Patricia's need is not financial, but money for her work gives her a conviction that her work is valued. Valuing work and pricing issues are common difficulties for many of these actors at least in their early years of self-employment at a time when they are getting themselves and their products or services established. And, in addition, or indeed as a part of this, they are at pains not to be seen as greedy, although some of them certainly perceive those in business to be, or have to be, greedy. For these actors, despite money being the bottom line, satisfaction is measured with a different guage. And there are compromises to be wrangled over between this bottom line and the lofty ideals and dreams.

### **The best laid plans?**

I'm getting quite interested in the way in which many of us started out thinking or imagining that we would be doing one thing as self-employed and then ended up doing something rather, if not entirely, different. It seems to me that this is one of the ways in which self-employment can differ from the starting up of a small business with, say, employees, a factory perhaps, and tools, machines and equipment. There is a flexibility in at least the early years to change direction or follow new markets. I wonder too if it is in part connected with the lack of long term funding available for some self-employed when their businesses start up. They simply have to start bringing in an income and perhaps cannot wait for their chosen or preferred product or service to take off. I wonder had I

continued long enough whether I would eventually have found myself making silk wall-hangings again, on the back of a business which allowed me to market my own products. In later contracts I did find that I could provide myself with opportunities to be creative in the sense that I wanted to be, and I remember spending hours and hours at my drawing board hand painting a border to be papered around a window. I also remember that I couldn't charge for it in terms of the hours it took to complete at the same rate at which I charged out my design work. So it took a considerable buffer of bread and butter work before I could indulge in icing the cake.

With this in mind I have followed with interest Freda's plans as they have developed but not come as yet to fruition. Freda has come up with some fascinating designs for her decorative dog collars, using high quality leathers and a range of jewels. She knows that to develop her ideas she needs clients who will appreciate her imagination and creativity, and be prepared to spend more for such skills to acquire a unique product. To follow her ideas through she would need to locate a particular market, and she is well aware that this market is not to be found in the North East or amongst her existing clients. She tentatively tried out a couple of local shows, but found them to be more trouble than they were worth: *"... we thought we'd do quite a bit of trade there but again it meant having quite a lot of stock there to sell on. If we'd had that we might have done quite well but because we make to order and repair we didn't, you know, it didn't really benefit us ... we didn't have the right things you know, we weren't geared up to what they wanted. I think too that they were expecting things to be a lot cheaper you know because ours is hand done and the leather is top quality leather so it's more expensive ..."*

So, to do what she wants to do Freda has to find her market: " We're thinking of going on the Internet as well because this work, well, we could maybe get work from America and that. We've had orders from Malta so we've got, you know, we're branching out, if people put the orders through the post and give us the measurements and things and maybe do a sketch of what they want then we can just make it up ... I mean people can't get the quality of stuff in the pet shops and they want, you know, they want what fits their dogs ..." And she has to get directly to that market: "I mean we have done some work for a pet shop and she was really pleased with the work but she said there's no way, she needs to put 90% on you know, and the amount we were having to charge we couldn't do that, but, you know, she has said that she will come back to us if anybody wants something made specially ... but we can't just take a lot of stuff along and then sell it on we can't do it price wise. We can't compete, we've got to get into the market where we're, um, you know, like the top end of the market where people are going to want to pay money for doing special stuff."

Several months later the topic arose again as Freda began a job making up a muzzle for a client. Her client had sent a paper cutout of what she wanted, and from this Freda took the measurements and started to cut the leather. We talked about it as she worked: "There's not many people about doing bespoke work in dog collars and muzzles. We often get people wanting muzzles made up or sort of like this lady at the minute wants ... so we thought, well, with this sort of thing, America is quite, they'll pay lots of money out like that so we thought well, we'll branch out... It's a matter of reaching the right people." Freda's husband, with us on this occasion continued: "Half the people you send work you made back to have probably sent correspondence back afterwards whether they've



*been ordering something else or saying 'that was smashing that, our little spaniel looks great in what you've made.'*"

On many occasions Freda has said how much she would prefer to be doing work with the dog collars for many reasons, not least that it involves far less running around and heavy work. She would like to be able to take orders by post and then make the work up and post it back, it would be simple and only involve a trip to the post office now and then. Besides it would also mean that she didn't feel obliged to be in her workshop to catch the unpredictable work that drifts in from the riding side, and which keeps her, work or not, in the workshop between certain hours.

Yet even now after months and months of wishing Freda is still stuck on her treadmill of saddlery repairs, and things have tended to take a different turn drawing her further away from her creative dream. She has recently met up with a designer who wanted her ideas made up, so Freda is cautiously cultivating this relationship and for the time being her dream of an easier way to millions is once more on the back burner. Such flexibility, in terms of being able to follow markets is, of course, lauded in the business schools and development agencies, as I suppose it is a survival technique, the aim of being in business ultimately, and as a dominant ideology and way of being, is to make money, no matter how. And it would seem to me that the view of those in the development and enterprise agencies is that the sooner this is learned the better.

Patricia was conscious of this as she started her business. She knew very well that she would get little support as a writer, but if she were to write, as she puts it, socially useful texts rather than fiction she would receive the support she wished for to run her writing as a business, which she

does by being a publisher as well, albeit exclusively of her own books. Whilst we have been talking together over a period of several months Patricia has been developing her writing and branching out into plays at last, which is what she really wanted to do. Her writing has been prolific over this period, an inspiration to me, but of course writing, or creating, and selling are two very different things. This has caused her some administrative headaches, as she feels that she is developing a second business, with entirely different ways of operating. She has been pondering over how to dovetail the two, and how indeed her tax situation will be assessed. Moreover, the publishing side of playwriting is something which to her appears quite complex and she is reluctant to get involved in it, despite the experience she is now amassing through publishing her earlier books. So Patricia, in a sense like Freda, has developed the bread and butter side of her business first, but has had greater liberty than Freda to explore now, how she may do what it was she really wanted to do in the first place.

How I wish I could say the same for Angela. Angela's business has felt alarmingly to me like a series of false starts riddled with self deception and self placation. It reminds me of the walks on which my brothers and I trailed when small, always wailing to stop and asking are we there yet? The reply from my father was always that our destination, whatever it was, was just round the next corner. A bit like writing this really. Small pieces at a time are palatable, but the whole horror is just too enormous to contemplate. However, the walks did finish, there was a walk to look back on as done, and each step was subsequent to, built upon, dependent upon the one before it. Angela, shortly after we began talking together, was waiting for the big one. This was the big contract that was going to catapult her into business with no looking back. The big one came, and



was big indeed, an enormous amount of work for her designing some very detailed marketing tools and literature for a pretty big company. But it wasn't the tidal wave that sweeps up to a great height and from which orbit is possible, it was merely a rise in tide over several months which left Angela swimming for dear life and no resources free to take advantage of the fact that she was now at least off the ground. As the tide ebbed away Angela was in the same position from which she had started. It was as if she had not really moved along at all, but been temporarily hoisted up so that she had been able to glimpse a further and wider horizon.

Landing back on the ground in the same position again, Angela started wondering what else to do to generate work for herself, to make contacts and bolster her confidence: *"In a perfect world I would organise myself to go out next week and get some rather super duper business cards, and hand them out willy nilly, ..."* She didn't do this, but about a month later she had bought herself a camcorder, for many reasons, one of which was as a step towards doing some promotional work with it: *"I think this was quite a major step, because if you've bought one you've got no excuse not to use it!"* Doing video work was part of Angela's initial plan, but the big contract had taken her into another way of working which involved her learning the ropes as it were in a new medium. Yet when it finished, where was her plan what should she do next? As she put it herself: *"When all that suddenly got dropped it was 'Ahh, who am I, what am I doing?'"*

For Angela, planning to do one thing and finding herself having to do, say, bread and butter work has not given her a stream of regular work or a steady flow of income. It has been unsettling: *"I know that in order to earn money I have to work, and I know that not all the work that I call work earns money immediately, but I also know that I have to do this otherwise*

*there's no real point in saying that I'm self-employed. If I don't set myself tasks and goals then I'm never going to get anywhere am I? I mean you can't, you know, you can't reach the end of the journey if you never set out on it."* She continued: *"I mean like when I first talked about the business plan idea to you I was so enthusiastic and my ideas were so big and then sooner or later they had to be brought down to what you can actually achieve at every stage, which, well, I suppose the limitations were set by what I did achieve. And then I go further and look at the big picture and then I come back and draw a little picture ... well I must be moving forward because I can see proper money, so that must be moving forward ... and you need something to tell you that you're moving forward, to be able to, to live, even for a short while is definitely a moving forward isn't it?"*

At the time I'm writing this I've had a telephone call from Alan, he's decided he's going to be a freelance poet. Having won a prize in a poetry competition he's decided to spend some of the hours he has in his treatment room - alone but trapped there waiting just in case the telephone should ring - writing poems for special occasions to commission. He intends to advertise this service with a poem in the local shops. It's a change of tack he says, but it might work.

### **Summary**

In this chapter some of the hopes and dreams of people entering into self-employment have been described, together with some of the compromises which emerge as actually doing something starts to differ from just thinking about it. Some of these hopes and dreams have been quite abstract, and had a lot to do with a sense of freedom in lifestyle. More have been practical and have been the sort of extending of the imagination from a given point to what might be possible within certain

circumstances. Such circumstances tend to have more than a little to do with money and in some cases time and place. It has not been unusual for these actors to follow courses of action which they didn't initially plan to at all, by pushing aside initial dreams to remain on their feet and moving on the self-employment treadmill. For many of them, maintaining balance and momentum has taken up all of their time, energy and financial resources. To take time out, stop to look around, reflect upon progress, or shift focus would perhaps threaten that balance. But not all of them have achieved any sort of momentum at this stage, so there is still for some of them the opportunity to cast around to see what they can do, or do next, to at least maintain their self-employed status.

In this chapter we have started to move from an understanding of the private lives of these actors to see how they connect with the public, for example, economic world. We, the actors and myself, have shared our broadest thoughts and imaginings, through divulging private dreams. As we have moved to the narrower constraints of a practical world of self-employment, the 'real' world has started to become exposed to us through these private perspectives and ways in which we make sense of a real world. Without by any means wishing to bring a sense of linearity to these complex issues, it may be useful nonetheless to picture this chapter as starting from a private, but broad, creative, imaginative stance and moving to a narrower, but public, one of economic constraints. And this may be paralleled when we consider how time as part of these broad imaginings is abstract, distant, unmeasured, yet in a practical sense short term time pressures impinge upon actors as does their place, space, locality for some of them. We are beginning to move then from the abstract to the particular, and what these particulars are for each of these actors. The

next chapter looks in depth at these as happenings in self-employment on a day to day basis.

## **Chapter Four, Discursive Consciousness**

This chapter is about the day-to-day activities that are a part of being and particularly here, becoming, self-employed. These activities demand a degree of attention which is more focused or concentrated as they are new or at least not taken for granted activities, hence the title. The chapter is separated into two interrelated parts, and although the topics are not treated as exclusive to each part, the first pays more attention to what it is to do self-employment, the second pays more attention to aspects of what it is to be self-employed.

### **Part I *Doing* self-employment**

This part of the chapter is concerned with the tasks the self-employed actors perform, as sole traders, alone. It emphasises the many tasks a person finds that they are responsible for, as, suddenly, in self-employment, the division of labour is no longer between separate individuals but becomes incarnate in their sole self. So I begin with the various tasks that serve to support the self-employed business. I then continue with the way these day-to-day activities provide opportunities to learn as one goes along, to slot experiences into the accumulating framework of experience that is informing one how to employ the self as self-employed. Getting organised is a part of this learning on the spot, and may be helped by previous experiences in employment, or frustrated by embryonic systems that defy prioritising, just as the threads that will shape a thesis do in the very early stages of research.

### **Jacks and Jills of all trades?**

The actors in this study are those who find themselves having to turn their hand to a variety of tasks and skills, and there is the financial imperative

that these skills are quickly and adequately mastered. I want to draw attention in this section to the many different tasks that take up the time, and attention, of those whose primary means of earning a living is through what they themselves produce. I'll start with a throw away line one of the actors came up with to explain one of the difficulties of being the person who did everything. Because it's one thing to say, 'oh ho, aren't you clever you do absolutely everything', the retort is likely to be, 'yes, but crucially, sometimes, only one thing at a time'. In John's words: *"Of course you know the problem with being self-employed is that you can actually only be with one customer at any one time"*. You cannot delegate, or send in the sales team, you do pretty much everything yourself. When you are selling you are not producing, when you are producing you are not purchasing and so on. Yet when you are not producing you need to be adept at selling, and when doing neither of these you need to be quite capable of book-keeping as these many tasks are what service a business, oil the wheels, keep it running, and so on. It's easy to assume that a saddler makes saddles all day, but that's often far from the truth.

I'll begin by describing one of the days I spent with Freda. It was at a time when Freda was feeling snowed under with work so I said I'd go in and help her out. No tape recorder, no interviews just spend some time with her but 'get my hands dirty'. The day began - after doing the parenting bit, dropping our offspring off at their respective schools - with a workshop full of people. There were customers, drinking coffee and warming themselves by the fire, Little One was crayoning on the table, Martin too had given over the day to helping out, and I nudged in as well, wriggling some elbow room at the bench to start assembling tools to make a bridle. Conscious that I should be a help and not a hindrance I concentrated hard as Freda showed me how to sew up the buckle into a cheek piece (that's



one of the bits that holds the top and the bottom of a horse's bridle together). Despite this I've not really got the 'feel' of the leather and the awl, so I have to interrupt Freda several times to be sure that I've not ripped the leather apart in the wrong place - the cheek piece is apparently worth between £2 and £3 but nonetheless this is her livelihood I'm messing around with.

By two in the afternoon I've made a fair stab at the cheekpiece, it's only taken me four hours. However, this modest cheekpiece is the only thing that has been produced all day. Whilst I have been scrabbling and poking and tugging over a piece of leather no more than ten inches long, Freda has spent the day on the telephone fielding calls from people trying to sell her advertisements, chasing up a part for the broken photocopier, feeding Little One, fetching food for the evening meal, studying two faxes which came through selling spaces on the Internet, looking for a repair job mislaid somewhere in the workshop and stripping leather off a hide in preparation for another bridle. In addition she has been visited by someone bringing in a rug to be mended, and made tea and coffee for us all. She has directed some of her attention towards some leaflets she's planning to have reprinted, and has sought my opinion on the logo. Martin has not finished the rug repair but that's it, the day is gone on bits and pieces and running around in circles. Later, when it is quiet, Freda will finish in fifteen minutes what took me four hours, and then will turn her attention to the statement that arrived from the bank manager and figure out if she should order some more hide now or wait for further orders to come in. I wrote in my field notes of this visit to Freda: *"As I left she was loading the other two kids into the car ... She starts cooking when she gets home then there are three to bath and bed. Then she can start the day's productive work."*

Angela too finds herself having to do tasks that are work related but not actually productive, bits and pieces that service the 'work' bit of work. A lot of this she looks at as the creative side, exploring new data packages and dovetailing bits and pieces of software to see what she can produce. We talked about how this way of working was different from being employed by someone else, our concern as we spoke was about the number of seemingly unproductive hours of work-related tasks, that were necessary but not immediately beneficial: *"It's a different kind of work, it's different processes and different scenarios, just all different. And I think if I worked in a huge company it would still be different because you're talking about something that's creative, and you can't delegate creativity ... You'd probably do it in your own time..."*

Like Freda it's the tasks that support the business without directly bringing in an income that take up a lot of her time. As Freda said; *"and then again it's paperwork as well, you work when you're here and you've got to get paperwork done when you get home"*, and Angela, *"Let's be honest I mean yes I allocate a good few hours a day to business related tasks, even if it's just e-mailing someone to say 'hi I'm still alive how are you?' The networking thing. Pricing seems to take forever ... [doing] about three or four a week. I mean like some jobs, pricing for the conference took a day and a half by the time they'd finished messing about ..."* "And that one didn't come off?" "No." For Angela pricing the job she refers to here involved visiting several printing firms for quotations, the visits involving chatting to managers there with a view to them getting involved in that job and hopefully others, and giving a good impression of herself as 'businesswoman'. The preparation and presentation, therefore, were as

meticulous as they would be if she were off to see a client, and yet no direct income came from these meetings.

Alan spends an enormous amount of time it seems not actually treating people's sports injuries but working out how to attract those people to him in the first place. The development of the business at the moment is a constant preoccupation. As I arrive to see him on the second visit to his place of work he greets me with the information that he knows exactly how many clients he needs per week to break even, the least number he can manage with for a short period of time and the most he can fit into a day. Alan maintains a constant daily check on these figures, and what he is doing is no more than would be advised by any business school. He is 'benchmarking', keeping vigil over his business accounts so that he knows at any time how well or poorly he is doing. As well as being financial controller for his business Alan is also secretary and receptionist, keeping records of all the clients that have visited him so that he knows how often and when they came, what their injury was and how many sessions it took to put it right. He is also marketing manager and leaflet distributor. He had 2,000 leaflets printed and is delivering them all himself by hand - and bicycle - fifty to a hundred each day before getting in to work.

Sometimes we have a chat on the telephone and I ask Alan what he's been doing over the last few days. The response is usually in terms of whether or not business is quiet, and so the information is quite vague. It is easy to get a sort of blurry picture of what we imagine people to be doing. Pinning Alan down by asking him what he was just doing before I arrived, or before I telephoned, the response is often that he has been reading. Alan reads avidly about business management and marketing: "*I can't afford marketing advice so I read about it*", and of course about

health care and diets. Now and again he writes poems, so occasionally he has a go at one when the week is quiet and he's *"stuck here just in case."*

Alan has been on the lookout for a different place to work, and this too has taken up work time as he has been off to visit various premises. Bill had the same thing to do when he wanted to take on a shop and expand, arranging to do this took up earning time. Timothy has to check out the local antique fairs to keep an up to date knowledge of prices and what's what in the trade. For Briony the preparation if she's doing a community arts project takes hours and hours of unpaid for, unaccounted for, time, usually stretching into the evening before the project starts. For Fiona, the artist, the time before an exhibition is filled with distracting tasks and she estimates she spends an inordinate amount of time then at the framers. Then at other times she is house bound waiting for materials to be delivered. Eric said to me: *"you know there's help on hand, plenty willing but I don't even have the time to organise it, and so often I'm called out at the drop of a hat."* And so he finds himself changing tyres at two in the morning so that a car is fit for work four hours later. And whilst I was with Anthony he had a call back from one of his client's accountancy departments, it was about an unpaid invoice Anthony was chasing. As he put the telephone down he waved the bill at me and said, contrasting self-employment with being employed for someone else: *"you see I never had to spend whole afternoons doing things like this", and, "I used to have technicians to change plugs for me, now I have to do it myself!"*

I had also had "unforeseen" tasks that I tended to overlook when pricing a job: preparing the curtains for transporting, fitting and hanging. Because whether I had made the curtains myself or an outworker had made them, and whether I was fitting them myself or getting my fitter to do them, the

enormous, heavy, usually hand sewn and interlined curtains, had to be hung and steamed, then laid out in their intended folds, and slipped into plastic coverings ready for transporting and fitting. If this wasn't done then the chances were that my clients would end up with what looked like old bran sacks hanging off their walls, and first impressions, the 'wow' factor is quite important for prompt payment. Preparing the curtains, and indeed all the tie backs, swags and tails and all the dressy bits took hours and wasn't done until the night before fitting, when the studio could be taken over by them all spread out all over the floor. I tended to think of these evenings' work as work done in my own time, a sort of added extra that supported the business, something extra I put in rather than something I should charge for doing.

These sorts of tasks are the quiet and often lonely bits. They are not the bits that absorb you in creative production, or frighten or excite you with the thrill of getting a job, or a new client, or another helpful supplier. They are the hum-drum but ever so essential tasks that support what it is one does as self-employed. And this is something that is learned in the processes and practices of self-employment perhaps more than at the planning stages. Which leads me to consider what else is learned in this way and how.

### **Learning as you go along**

I have grouped the experiences of these actors. It seemed that they learned through different ways, and about different things. Some of them sought texts about being in business, or about their particular form of work. Some learned from others, watching or listening or asking about different aspects of their work. Learning from experience, be it good or

bad, and reflective conversations with me were other ways in which these actors learned about themselves and their businesses.

Patricia was very organised about her learning, and realised from the start that there was a lot of research to be done and information to be gathered. A lot of this was done before she launched her business. Remember that she thought long and hard about what it was that she wanted to do as self-employed, she thought about the pros and cons of painting and writing, and looked into counselling too. Having set up her business she spoke to me about just how much she had learned from the printer she used. She felt that he had rather taken her under his wing, and that he had saved her plenty of time and money by advising her about how to prepare her work for printing and about book bindings and many of the practicalities of publishing. Patricia was staggered at how much there was to learn but at the same time excited about how much she had learned in the space of really a very short time. She told me about the sequences and stages involved in preparing her publications, including the editing and indexing. These latter tasks she did herself and felt that she had had to learn new skills to do them. To sum up the way Patricia accommodated her learning, it seemed to me that she prepared space for new learning, to the extent that she had the box files ready and waiting to be labelled with each new experience.

On one of my later visits Patricia met me at the door with a hefty folder in her hand. At this stage in our meetings she was branching out, exploring the possibility of changing course into playwriting, and having started the writing part was at the same time researching how to market plays. She had accumulated quite a bit of data and correspondence, and was sifting through it at this stage to decide on the best approach to take. She had

learned about which sorts of plays are currently popular, and the sorts of size of casts currently preferred, and this, she said, would save her from writing plays that would not be popular or demand casts not easily assembled these days.

Alan's research through reading is a little different. His books tend to be on the subject of diets and nutrition, and he uses the knowledge gained from them to - very informally - advise clients on their general well being. In addition he reads books on marketing and business. From one such publication he has taken copious notes which he has boiled down into a list of do's and don'ts for his day-to-day practice. This latest book became temporarily Alan's bible of business, and from this he gained ideas about getting clients, offering incentives like free sessions, doing talks at local clubs and offering sessions as raffle prizes and so on. Alan is now not at all sure that any of these ideas have worked, but feels that he has been given ideas which have prompted him to think more broadly about how to promote his services. The raffle prize idea is one such notion that he tried quite thoroughly, doing talks at local clubs and offering treatment as a raffle prize. But he now feels that all he has done is give out free treatment to those who would not become clients because they really only wanted to claim their prize, which has as he puts it, wasted his time and energy.

Angela is learning about new computer packages more or less all the time as she goes along, and also about her own capabilities. It takes a fair chunk of her time, and it is not at all unusual for her to find herself rapidly reading to update her knowledge of some new software that she's using concurrently for a contract. We talked quite a bit about this and how this reading and knowledge updating is very much a part of work but more as

a future investment, rather than something that it is possible to cost out on current jobs. Although it is undoubtedly work, for Angela it is also a relaxation, a pleasure, something that she doesn't resent doing but enjoys. Discussing this at length:

Angela: *"... the software I've been using I was testing and the deadline was midnight so after midnight the software stopped so I had to do it instead of in a nice software package I had to do it in notepad."*

Jill: "So you were using a free trial package to do the work but that finished at midnight?"

"Yep."

"Did you know it was going to finish, did you remember?"

"Yep."

"So what are you going to do about that now?"

*"I'm going to buy some more software but last night I didn't want to install anything different, it was easier to do it by hand because I knew what I was doing than it was to go through the learning curve of interfacing with new software."*

"So if you hadn't had to do the work by hand how many hours would it have taken?"

*"It would have knocked a couple of hours off."*

"OK, but its budget reasons that mean you're using the free sample software?"

*"Yep, Oh Yes, well and partly the fact that there is so much software about, how can you be sure what's good for you, you're paying £150 so you have to be sure of the piece of software before you buy it ..."*

"So how many have you tried and given a good testing so far?"

*"About six."*

"And that's increasing your knowledge all the time?"



*"Yes, but at the end of the day I've not found one that's perfect ... and I'm surprised, because I've never been taught to edit by hand I'm surprised how confident I am doing it."*

"How much of your time is spent taking in new knowledge?"

*"All the time I'm not working."*

"What percentage of your time?"

*"Good question, I don't really know, um, more than when I was studying at college."*

"So its a fair chunk of your time?"

*"Yep, and it's always going to be like that as new things develop."*

"But you're taking on this knowledge for what reason?"

*"To apply it to the work."*

"How much do you apply it ... so far if you were to say so much percent of time is spent in taking in new knowledge how much of that knowledge do you apply immediately?"

*"100% or say 90% - it's a fast turn around even if some of it is reinforcing knowledge that I might have already had."*

"Can you cost that out?"

*"I wouldn't know how to begin to cost it out!"*

"But would you consider this taking in of knowledge work time?"

*"I don't consider it as work time but it is work time because it's not leisure ... well yes I suppose it is borderline leisure time but it's not chosen leisure time is it, in the same way as you would choose to go to the pub? I choose to read a book because I know I have to read it sometime and I've got nothing else to do unless I choose to go the pub and the book wins because it's one of my priorities. I don't think of it as work in so much as it's interruptable, it's pick up and put downable, there's no deadline or there's rarely a deadline unless there's something I've got to achieve and I don't know how to do it yet. So that's why I don't classify it as work. Yes it*

*is quite pleasurable because it's something that I've chosen to do and I would hope to do it better by reading more about it. I'm a great problem solver, I don't like not being able to do things so I'm constantly well, I wonder if that's possible OK how do you do it ..it sounds awfully sad to read a technical book from start to finish! ... But then I always did read like that!"*

"Back to how you cost this out, you've been working on this contract. Ever since I've started coming to talk with you it's been in the pipeline. Did you start, kind of, reading in preparation for this?"

*"No I was reading already but I suppose the push is from the client, but the reading for the project is about some skill I need to have. The initial push is from a client saying I want one of these, or, I want you to do this for me. So, they want something, and I say I think that's possible, and then, I figure out how to do it. Then I will see things, like, other possibilities whilst working on a job and find other ways of doing things. Some little thing will spark off the creativity and you think wow, if not now, then perhaps next time ... and what you learn with one is fed into the next!"*

"I can relate to that because I'd go into a house and the client would say I want this and this and you'd say yes, then go away and think about how on earth to do it. Then you'd start to research it and you get side tracked as other things came into the equation and then you'd think well if I can make this a better way then maybe I can make that a better way too!"

Anthony put it this way: *"I've always enjoyed dabbling in a bit of everything. I'm financially cautious but academically I take risks, if someone 'phones and says can this be done I'd say yes and list the problems rather than no and list the reasons."*

Angela and Bill both noted that they learned from watching other people. Angela said this about getting to know someone else in business that she met on an Enterprise Training course:

Angela: *"I've seen him three times since then, I've just popped in, when I've been passing I've made a point of going out of my way so ..."*

Jill: "Is he a potential client?"

Angela nods her yes

"Are you conscious that he's a potential client?"

*"I guess I am, ... I'm aware that because he's in business he has a potential network through which something may feed back, I do not underestimate the power of that kind of allegiance, but I genuinely pop in to say hello because he's someone I've found common ground with and we get on well anyway, albeit on a moderately superficial level. I am very conscious that I like to be friends with people in business because I like to watch how they do their business. Because of my own insecurities with it I learn from watching. I mean I just can't pick the business thing up, I learn from watching."*

"What do you mean by the business thing?"

*"The way they manage the business and their time and their interest, the way they develop their business, their attitude towards their business."*

"How do you watch this, what things do you watch?"

*"Just by talking to them. For example this chap fancies himself as a bit of an entrepreneur, he's got several little things on the go at once and it's just interesting to listen to how he assesses his market, assesses what's good value for money, how he assesses what the market price should be, how he assesses what new venture he's going into next, all those little processes, so many of them can be applied to what I'm having to be doing. I'd do it with anybody that's earning their own living."*

"Is this how you answer all your questions about what you call the business thing?"

*"I hate to call it that but yes, I'm not a business person, I just can't do it by the book, you know I can read the book and it just doesn't work for me."*

"What do you mean, what doesn't work for you, what is it 'in the book'?"

*"It's such a pure model, the planning thing. I don't think that way, I'm more organic than that I don't think in lovely little straight lines it's another of those things that I have a conceptual problem with."*

Bill said that he spent hours in the shop he planned to take over watching the current owner and noting how he went about running it. As he said to me, he has plenty of plans to update the place and expand, and has found areas where he feels there is room for improvement, but he has learned plenty from just spending some time watching. He's noticed that one of the skills he needs to acquire is the ability to translate customer's terms for what they want into the technical names for things: *"They'll come in and say 'I want a bit of pipe about so long to do such and such a thing with' ... well you have to be sure what they're talking about!"*

Perhaps, though, one of the best teachers is experience. Freda for example, on one of my early visits to her she was discussing the amount they were spending on advertising. As has been mentioned before, this is a bone of contention between Freda and Martin. It is Freda who has to field the calls from persuasive advertisement sales representatives, and on more than one occasion she has given in with an 'oh go on then' when they've asked her if they might run her advertisement for a longer period, or in a special feature. She feels she'll not get caught so quickly now, and will pay more attention to just how much work an advertisement brings in. Having said that, she has still had a job to say a direct 'No' to sales

representatives who have telephoned, on one occasion using me to consult with whilst keeping the representative hanging on the line.

Freda has also learned the hard way to keep a diary of the arrangements that she makes with clients. On one occasion she had a difficult interaction with one of her clients who arrived earlier than expected to collect a repair -unfortunately on a day when Freda herself happened to be late. The repair had not been done and her client was so angry that after waiting for Freda to do the repair there and then, took her saddlery away with her and vowed not to return. Freda knew full well that she had arranged for the repair to be done by the Friday of that week, and the client had turned up not only half an hour early but a whole day early. This lesson had its costs as Freda felt very upset about the whole affair for a long time. She now keeps records of the arrangements made for the collection of repairs, and prices agreed, so that there will in the future be no margin for misunderstanding. It would be nice to be able to say that Freda has learned to stand her ground after this incident, unfortunately that doesn't seem to be the case, and she still finds herself giving in over little alterations to jobs, and footing the bill herself. On one occasion she found herself caught between joint owners of a horse who were commissioning a bridle from her. She began by following the demands of one of them, only to find on completing the bridle that the other one preferred something different: *"I should have been more specific at the start and checked exactly what they both wanted."* she said. And again and again she has said, particularly over measurements: *"It would have been better and in the end quicker if I'd gone and taken the measurements myself. I just knew I should have done it myself."*

Alan is learning from bitter experience too, and again it is about knowing that really you know best, not the customer, or the customer's friend in this case: *"I mean there was a woman I went to see, she had hurt her leg and I worked on it with her lying down. She made another appointment for the Monday and she rang up and cancelled it. You see it would have been better if I'd worked on it with her sitting up, you see that was my error, and I thought of that afterwards. I have learned now that with an older person to make sure that they are always comfortable, you see I could have had her as a client every week, but I listened to her friend who said she was always moaning and told her to get up on the bed. It worries me that this has happened, I take it on board, some people brush things off whatever they do but I take a hold of things you know, so it shows what I'm doing is the right type of thing for me to do if I learn from my past experiences. I don't think she'll complain but you see every customer is a better advert than these leaflets going through the door."*

The last comment about learning for the moment comes from Angela, and it reflects a sentiment far from exclusive to the domain of self-employment: *"Do I really want to be learning new tricks all the time? You never seem to get to the stage where you're secure enough to say I know how to do this, because there's always something else you've got to learn ..."*

### **OK lets get some structure around here**

But we have seen in Freda's case at least, that learning involves organising oneself. It is about starting to order work, prioritise tasks and find systematic or at least broadly directional ways through the day-to-day business of self-employment. Such organisation may be temporal and / or spatial, and, it seems to me, starts to happen *after* the start of self-employment.

Patricia has a way of setting some sense of regularity to her week. It involves starting with an art class on the Monday morning. This is as much a part of getting organised in her life after employment as it is setting up her working week. As she said: *"... when I was made redundant I had no hobbies my work took up all of my time. [The art class] is ten til twelve on a Monday and I always try to keep that to go to."* Timing and keeping some sense of regularity are important to Patricia and she has got herself into a habit now which she tries to maintain of doing all her tasks in an appropriate order on a weekly basis. However, she doesn't think in terms of a week at a time or a day at a time, she takes a long view of where she expects to be with her writing, and a shorter view of how she expects the orders to come in on her publications. On a day-to-day basis she puts the morning aside to deal with orders, she has a target of turning them around in 24 hours. So her becoming organised has a lot to do with sifting things into what are the appropriate time frames for her. This is a skill which Anthony has felt that he has had to get his head around, particularly in terms of watching what goes out and when what is invoiced actually comes in: *"Keeping an eye on lots of time frames at once.- if my partner wasn't doing the books I'd be in a bit of a mess, I'm a bit naive [about chasing invoices] and financially it's a bit of a balancing act."*

We might expect Patricia to be organised in this way as she herself says: *"I was a manager for so many years its the management and that's what I enjoy about plays, and I probably don't like in books, you've got to manage it, manage yourself and you've got to manage the work to get it done on time and to the printer on time, and it's this discipline, you've got to get it done otherwise nobody is going to come round and do it for you, you've got to be pushing yourself all the time. And I suppose it becomes*

*like you're moulding it and trying to get the best out of it as the manager."* And Jenny, also a manager made redundant, said of the pro's and con's of self-employment: *"I've always enjoyed managing people, that's the strongest part of me ..."* although managing herself, she says, is not always a piece of cake for her. However, her office space, like Patricia's home, is the model of orderliness, and Jenny separates work from home by walking through the office door.

By contrast Freda, and she'll forgive me for saying it as this is indeed self-confessed, comes across as a remarkably disorganised person, existing in a melee of noisy children, greasy harnesses, wax crayons and biscuits. Freda and I have discussed on many occasions how to bring the tasks round into some sort of order, and these discussions are always instigated by Freda herself. A commonly used business term for the way in which Freda finds herself operating is 'firefighting'. In other words reacting to trouble or pressures rather than controlling and determining her own progress. When we first met Freda was collecting work from several different clients on as many days of the week. This involved transport costs and time, and of course took time away from producing the repairs or items. Freda knew that it was hardly cost-effective to drive several miles for a repair worth less than say £10, but lacked the courage to pull her clients into line until we began our discussions. She felt that she hadn't quite the nerve to ask them to have all their repairs ready for collection on the same day, besides to get the business she had bent over backwards to be as accomodating as possible and was initially reluctant to change arrangements that her customers had grown used to. But we'd mull these things over and after a while Freda succeeded in making some changes.



Her work bench was a rather different matter! I should explain that there are several different qualities and colours of hide, which when they arrive are stripped into various widths and thicknesses ready for cutting to suit bridles and so on. Once lengths have been used on particular items the offcuts and spares are slung under Freda's workbench ... I suspect some of them never to be seen again. On one visit to Freda, I spent the entire day, it seemed, on my knees, sorting out different permutations of leather strap and hanging them in ordered groups from the rafters. It was one of those jobs Freda had always wanted to get around to doing but never seemed to have the time. And I remember being exactly the same, having heaps of bits of lining fabric, all valuable in that there was always the odd cushion they could be used for, but they became buried under heaps of other off-cuts and so their worth was never proved. Freda, on a following visit, remarked upon how much easier it was to find things and to my amusement had her mother there that day, (she was up on a visit from the Midlands) and she was busy sorting out all the brass buckles into sizes and grades.

It is very difficult to sort out systems whilst work is in progress, as all of us know who have had to change rooms or move house in the middle of writing chapters for example. My lining fabric never got sorted out because I couldn't stop the work to readjust its running. Neither could Freda stop to sort her workshop out whilst work was in progress, hence the value of her mother and myself coming in to straighten things out for her. It can also be quite difficult to start to work unless everything feels organised, and so rearranging systems, bookshelves and so on seems to be, at least in academia, a wonderful way of *not* starting a task!

For Angela and Alan, organising work *materials* wasn't an obvious issue. Angela like Freda came across as remarkably disorganised but somehow getting away with it and Alan came across as remarkably organised but with nothing to organise very much. If there is any crispness and briskness about how some of these actors have gone about organising their ways of working, it's certainly not apparent in the way in which Angela does it. We really have to slow the pace to mull over Angela's way of becoming self-employed. If I were to draw a graph of Angela's levels of work activity over the time we have been linking up, I would expect it to look like a profile of, say, Snowdonia, with the heady ozone height of activity during 'the big contract' and the damp fog filled valleys all around. The valleys are slow and perhaps barely productive days at home for Angela, and they're not really happy ones. We talked about these valleys in one of our later chats, at a time when Angela felt she was beginning to climb out of them and develop some more energy and purpose, and indeed some organised direction to her days. This direction was informed by her idea of what her whole lifestyle should be like, and her business she felt, should support that, financially and also by not impinging upon the way she wants to live:

Angela: "... *I've done factory work but that doesn't fit in with my idea of how I should be spending my day, come to think of it I don't think it's how anybody should be spending their day.*"

Jill "So to what extent do you feel you are living your lifestyle now?"

"*Well I'm not, but it's always been a process of getting there ... I've come out of the chrysalis, I've been a lot more, well, I'm aware that winter's coming in, then if I don't fill this period then I'll just sink down in to hibernation for the winter, but that said I'm doing a lot less watching television, I'm being a lot less distracted by the TV and rather than sit down and watch the TV for an hour I tend to take the dog out for a walk*

*which although not work is far more energising than sitting in front of the television because I come back with a clear mind and work."*

"Were you watching TV a lot before?"

*"I was very, very distracted."*

"When I was first coming to see you you were taking television breaks ..."

*"Well, I have gone beyond that now because it stopped nourishing and started being an excuse for sitting down and doing nothing, and it was becoming quite, well almost destructive because if there were programmes that I wanted to watch I told myself that they were useful because it was learning something else and I enjoyed that and it was refreshing, but then it got that I was watching it out of habit and I was no longer enjoying it and oh there's some mindless rubbish on afterwards - so I kept on watching."*

I asked Angela whether she was still working right through into the night and early hours of the morning, which she had tended to do on the big contract work, or whether she'd managed to stop having to do that. "Yes, *I'm working normal hours, I'm working a lot less but getting a lot more done, well no, not so much getting more done because I've not had anything so intensive as that big contract, but working has become more a voluntary thing, and I mean, two thirds of the way through that contract it was a chore, and another thing about my anticipated lifestyle was that work should never be a chore. I mean, it's OK when you've nearly finished a project and you wish it was done now, but it was affecting everything, my thought processes, and working was a chore and I got tied up in this tiny thing really, and there weren't enough hours in the day, well of course there weren't enough hours in the day because I was watching the bloody telly! Whereas I've now sort of gone back to OK, well I'll do this, and then*

*I'll do that, and then I'll come back to this for a while, and well yes the children come in from school and there's dinner to be made and so on ..."*

"But you sound much more relaxed about it all now."

*"I feel a lot more relaxed."*

"Is this because you've put work back in to work time ...?"

*"Mmm not consciously, I think possibly I was pissed off with work and I used the telly as a means of getting back at it, that was me subverting the bosses you know every employee does it at some stage, you think, Oh sod it I'll do it, but not the way you want it done and not to the timescale you want either, and I guess in a way I played that little game with myself."*

Alan keeps his mind on work regardless of whether he has any clients or not. His days begin in a very routine fashion, early rising and cycling to work. He remains in his place of work all day long apart from the briefest of trips to the food store around the corner at lunchtime. We have not given over much of our conversations to discussing how he gets organised specifically, but every conversation has touched upon different aspects of his self discipline and routine. Alan is a creature of habit, and resolutely settles himself day after day in his room, for a full 9am to 5pm day - sometimes after a few hours of poster dropping, and sometimes prior to an evening visit to a client. He doesn't like to be away from the room for fear of missing a telephone call, so all other aspects of the business which involve being out of the room are pushed to either end of the day or over to a Sunday. This has frustrated him greatly as he is still very much operating on client numbers far below his potential, and yet it has taken some time and mulling over for him to consider reorganising his week. Yet he did so for a while, particularly in the face of desperate measures to develop his client base, and he took one day off a week,

always a Tuesday, to spend time marketing his business, though he hasn't kept this habit going.

It has taken Alan some time to prioritise his tasks and adapt what he does to what he wants from the business. As noted above, Anthony finds this pretty tricky, and remarks that if it wasn't for his partner keeping tabs on things they'd often have cashflow problems. Hilary had another way of putting this. She is not desperately scrabbling around for clients as Alan has been, her problem, however, is still about having some influence and control over what jobs and commissions come in. She exercises what control she can by mailshotting different client groups at different times, so that when the telephone begins to ring she has some chance of knowing what sort of work it will be bringing. I was struck at the time by how sensible this seemed, and again as I write I think of how many advantages exercising control at this level has. Hilary put it that she lacked confidence and got flustered very easily and that was why she did this.

On the whole the idea of getting organised, besides sorting out leather straps, has a lot to do with self discipline, being in the work place, being there at work times, and ordering tasks in terms of preferences other than personal ones. In other words telephoning a client whose bill wasn't paid instead of wandering into the kitchen for a coffee. Eric called it being professional, extending this from dressing smartly to meet clients to being in a constant state of readiness for any job anticipated or otherwise. It is certainly about putting the temporal, spatial and material structures into place which support the practices of a self-employed person. We have considered many of these tasks as they occur in the isolation of studio workshop or practice. But self-employment doesn't come to one as a

'clean sheet' or 'blank slate', to mix metaphors, upon which we can just make up for ourselves what we do and where and when. Self-employment links in with, say, the family activities, or the printer's deadline or the closing times of the local retailers. So getting organised involves linking in or gearing into these other areas of life.

### **Interdependence and integration**

This section is concerned with the way in which the day-to-day activities of these self-employed actors are integrated with others, and as such show an interdependence either upon other businesses or, for example, family members who are flexible and informal 'employees'. So far I have looked at the day-to-day activities as things that are done or thought about, put into action or mulled over only by the actors themselves, and yet it is clear that Freda talks of decision making with Martin - she more often refers to them as we rather than her as I - and quite a few of the other actors, despite grumbles about being isolated, certainly bring family or friends in to mull things over with.

### **Business interdependence**

Angela early on in her self-employment had the opportunity of collaborating with some other people to go after a big and prestigious contract. To do this, she and the other two involved had to find a way of working together whilst clearly running their own businesses and looking after their own interests. Angela found this particularly difficult, and had a good grumble about it to me on the telephone one evening. My notes were: "*Angela says the problem is that they think her bit's easy, she's just got to do the artwork ... and Edward [one of the collaborators in the contract] seems for that reason to be dumping more stuff on her. She hopes at the end of the week they'll not be disappointed and want to pay*

*her less ..."* When I visited her shortly after this telephone conversation and we got into talking about work it was: *"... work, um, well... Sky and Edward, overshot the deadlines to me, neither have sent completed work to me for me to do my bit on, but they have their own problems, talking but not communicating ...I'm happy to control my part of the project and leave the problems to them..."* But they're late with their work: *"I need their stuff otherwise I can't do my bit. It's not my fault, they'll want to see it before it goes to [the client], communication is the key to getting it completed. We're all sharing, not separate tasks, well separate tasks but coordinating all the time, Sky and Edward's tasks are linked all the time."*

Angela has found that even if she's not in collaboration with anyone at the outset of a project that there is a degree of collaboration and cooperation that needs to be sought, business relationships to be developed if work is to get done. She was particularly disappointed when that quote for the conference wasn't accepted after she had gone to the trouble of developing new contacts with printers in the course of putting the quotation together: *"I mean like that price for the conference, which in the end they turned round and I didn't get the job, and I thought well for all I've done, going out to visit them, striking up an alliance with the printer, he actually came back and undercut the people that had done it originally and ... so there I am going to a strange printer and saying well, look, you know, if we can cut this job down in price we've got it, then having it, well, OK I'm let down and I've let somebody else down and I don't like that feeling.... I went out to the printers and I sat down and I had coffee and I met people who were nice and, but ... well it certainly hasn't brought me any brownie points!"*

Angela went on to say that in developing a relationship with the printer - and really it could be any supplier: *"I mean, a better introduction would have been yes this is Angela, and Angela delivers the work, I mean especially because they went to a lot of bother to get the price and skim the price."* However, this is the sort of thing that happens in business, and illustrates the chain of events that knock on from one business to the next. Angela's relationships with other 'helpers' if you like, people that she can call upon for advice are slightly different, in that they are experts in full time work anyway, and Angela is only likely to call on them to pick their brains and draw upon their expertise once a project or job is underway. The relationship is less formalised than an exchange relationship. However, having been asked to put in a proposal for a rather complex piece of work she was having to think about what degree of interdependence she might need to establish to achieve the job if it came off: *"If I can pull it off successfully what a thing to pull off, you know and I hate to say I do quite like challenges, even though I loathe them when I'm going through them ...And this is why the research is doubly hard, because I'm also having to make my mind up about my own capabilities, and there may be a point where I say OK I can't do this, I'll bring somebody in to help me."* I asked her how she felt about that because she'd be budgeting for two people and be responsible for two people. Her response was: *"Um, not too bad because I know people I can bring in who have regular incomes anyway so it would just be pocket money for them."* I asked her if she would see that in terms of an expansion to her business. *"Because it would be an introduction to a potential regular employee although they wouldn't necessarily be employed by the business. It's a tenuous link to somebody ... it means I can look at if one day the business expands then here's someone I might pull in ... but there again how do I write that into a business plan, business plans are absolutes ...?"*



So Angela is learning the unwritten rules of interdependence in business. These rules were alluded to by Patricia's printer, someone who had, according to Patricia, been in business many years, and, it seemed, felt compelled to guide Patricia through her early experiences. As she put it: *"... when I first went to the printers and he sort of took me under his wing so to speak, he made me aware that although I thought I was a one man band he made me aware of how we are all dependent on other people even though we don't employ them."*

Such collaboration is developed by Hilary who found that when she was marketing to schools they were labouring under the illusion either that her services were already paid for by the Local Education Authority, or that they were to find the means to pay for her services out of their annual budget. In fact, so Hilary informed me, there are grants available for the sorts of projects she runs in the schools, it's just a matter of finding them. Hilary found the easiest solution was to find where the sources of funding were herself and for which sorts of projects it was available, then tailor her community arts topics to fit them, and direct the schools to the appropriate funding bodies. Brian does the same, directing people to funding bodies or private sponsors when a public sector client is having difficulties with his prices.

Alan's interrelatedness is less a collaboration and more a dependence upon his landlord to allow him a room at the back of the salon from which to run his business. Of course it is in the landlord's interests too to have every part of what is a large area earning money for him one way or another. Alan has not yet developed sufficient turnover to be able to afford his own premises, either as a leaseholder or freeholder. So he is

dependent upon those who can, and so sub-lets part of their property. It is caution on Alan's part, if he sub-lets he is not bound into lengthy contracts, whereas if he takes the lease on a commercial property, and the majority of business properties are leasehold, then he will be bound into a commitment to keep up payments for at least three years. It is doubtful whether Alan's environment helps his business in any way, but he does have the practical advantage that there are receptionists on the premises able to take calls for him and make bookings, even if, as Alan feels, they don't quite give off a sufficiently professional or clinical air.

We might think that Freda's workshop is in an ideal place, and that therefore there is a degree of interdependence between her business and that of the stable's beneath her. However, there have been disadvantages as well as advantages to working in such close proximity to her clients, and Freda has found it better to disengage from their day-to-day activities so that her interdependence with others is not a distraction or a drain on her business time. During the time Freda and I were meeting, she was exploring business interactions with a shop in the locality. Freda had had some involvement with a shop before: *"We did get tied up with a shop before and we found it very difficult because she was expecting us to come and collect things, she was promising the customers they'd have it back the next day and it was like a £2 job, only a tiny bit of stitching. We were having to go across the town to pick it up and then back again and it was you know for, what the job involved, you couldn't put the extra money on for all the travelling you know, and it just ended up silly and then she was putting more money on top so it looked like we were charging too much and it just got a bit, you know, we're a bit reluctant to get tied up in a situation like that again but I think if you set it out to start with, right, these are my prices you can have ten percent of this sort of thing ..."* I asked her

if that's what she'd do if she developed a business relationship with this new and local shop: *"I think, I think, I mean I don't know whether you know how to work it, whether she should put a bit on top, um, or whether you know you give the commission out of, er, what you're charging, she takes commission out of that, or whether she puts it on top. If she puts it on top it's going to prevent people wanting to go in there maybe, I don't know, if they know that you're charging £x amount and they're taking it through there whether they'd er, ... do you know what I mean? ... so I don't know whether it's worthwhile going to see her or not. I mean, I don't suppose it will do any harm going to see her but ... we don't want to be sort of manipulated into what she wants, you know, without us benefitting from it. I mean we will benefit from it in the long run but why take it in and have the commission go to her when you can get it you know, if you can get it all yourself ... you may get more work through that, you know, through her doing it, you're more likely to get the work than um not ... it's difficult to say!"*

### **Family and friends**

So there's a reluctance on Freda's part to get too involved with another business until she's sorted out the details. Involvement with and of relatives and sometimes friends is a different matter. Freda uses Martin constantly as a buffer when large amounts of work come in, and can do this because Martin's work is reasonably flexible. She puts aside certain of the less skilled jobs which she has trained him to do, and they wait in the corner of the workshop for him to have the opportunity to do them. Freda also depends quite heavily on Martin for support in decision making, and often enough he directs Freda on business decisions. It seems to me that their way of working together when Martin comes in to help is quite harmonious, and that regardless of the odd joke about

throwing things at each other, their interdependence at work as well as at home is seen by both of them as a good thing. They talked about this linking together of tasks at home with the children and work tasks:

Freda: *"... um I mean Martin does a lot of the washing and that .."*

Martin: *"No I don't no I don't."*

*"Yes you do."*

*"Well yes, well Freda's there at three o'clock and I come back at half past five and um once the generator's on then I suppose Freda, well I'm a bit of a chauvinist, Freda needs to do, well, she does 99.9% of the work."*

Freda: *"We've just got a dishwasher and a washing machine ..."*

Martin: *"I like to get everything sorted out downstairs, but again a bit like the reports, I'll find anything else to do other than the children."*

Freda: *"I'll hit you now!"*

Martin: *"No no we do get on, it's quite amazing, the fact that most can't tolerate their other half but when we're working we get on very well, just the occasional rude word said to each other, there's nothing that sort of eats away at the relationship like that."*

Mother and Mother-in-law are roped in as well to meet the demands of the business when and where the strain is put on. Freda's Mother-in-law works in the nearest big town so is frequently the deliverer of finished work to clients and collector of repair jobs. The mention by Martin about reports refers to an earlier part of our conversation together in which the three of us were discussing the sorts of tactics we have for avoiding particular jobs. Freda's Mother-in-law is, it seems, notorious for cleaning the house before getting on with her reports which she hates doing. Freda and Martin confessed to no such bad habits. As Mother-in-law lives with them there is quite a high degree of task sharing, family and work tasks. And when Freda's Mother comes up to stay with her there she is, in the

workshop sorting out Freda's jars of brass buckles with the friendly but rather grim perspective that someone's got to help her daughter get organised, and as the older kids are at school and Little One is happily playing then she might as well do the workshop!

And Sally wouldn't know where she was without her Mother-in-law either. Sally's catering business depends upon her help and goodwill: "*... mean she'd come and waitress for me at weddings and come and clean the house for me, or she used to wrap up the cutlery. It's all those jobs needing to be done and take a lot of time and I just didn't have the time ye know, she used to get pocket money and things and ye know, I would maybe give her some cakes and crisps. But she would come along if I had a function and pick up the things and load the dishwasher and everything and do the salt and peppers ...*"

But she is also dependent, a bit like Alan is, upon the standards in the place she works in. Sally's venture into catering took her to a pub in the region which had room for someone to do lunches and evening meals. Unbeknown to Sally the region wasn't one which seemed to need a pub to do food, and this particular pub was rather better known for the amount of beer it served, and the unruly behaviour of its clientele. So it didn't matter how well she cooked or indeed what she cooked, Sally couldn't overcome the rough and ready reputation that the pub had, and finally gave up that venue. As she put it: "*It did ne matter what ye did, you'd go round and take fresh flowers to the tables and there'd be broken chairs and things ...*"

### **Summing up part I**

The first part of this chapter has given attention to self-employed actors' day-to-day tasks and activities. Some of these tasks and activities have

been actions, and some preoccupations that have or have not turned into actions later. We first looked at some of the observations actors made about finding themselves having to do so many and varied tasks as self-employed. Then we looked at some of those incidents in which actors were learning as they went along, as a result of which some were beginning to put systems or frameworks into place to better help them. Then we looked at the sorts of activities which required interweaving with other's work and lives, other businesses, family and friends, such interweaving being necessary, useful or unavoidable. I have collected these issues together as actions and activities, processes and ways of doing that are more particularly about *doing* self-employment. In part two I want us to consider similar activities and processes of becoming self-employed but which are perhaps more about *being* self-employed.

### **Part II *Being* Self-employed**

In this second part of the chapter we shall look at a number of ways in which the self-employed self is consciously put together and re-presented. I discuss gender in-so-far as it helps or gets in the way of putting across a self-employed self, but I've not talked it up into being very significant at all where actors have seemed oblivious to any gender issues relevant to their becoming self-employed.

The activities described in the data fall into two task categories, the first being the task of image construction, and the second the task of finding clients. The former, image construction, might be at the points at which face-to-face contact with clients or customers occurs, or on the telephone, or via other media like leaflets, newspaper advertisements and so on. This connects with the second task, that of finding new and more clients. Business literature has formulae, ways of doing this, yet it seems with my

clients to be a more iterative process, of trying things out and building upon each experience. The successes it seems are then measured by comparing the response rates from clients with the cost of the advertising.

### **Image construction**

I'd always had a thing about being on time for meetings or appointments, I hated being late and felt that tardiness was a sign of general shoddiness. To avoid the awful prospect of being late for a client I'd set off in good time and wait in my car around the corner from their site until I could safely turn up at a minute to meeting time. This became a routine for me, and doubly beneficial, I could give the impression of being punctual, and give the client the impression of having no other thought in my head than their - freshly revised - details. I felt better prepared than I would have had I dashed from site to studio to site with several different colour schemes, sizes, order numbers and what have you running round my head. This however was not the only time I frequented laybys. I also spent some time using them to park the old banger in, out of sight, when going to visit a "posh" client. On some occasions I would go so far as to hire a really smart car to glide up the drive in if the job was likely to be particularly lucrative.

Living in a relatively small town in which everyone, it seemed, knew everyone else, image wasn't only a worktime issue, or at least I didn't think so. I felt that I had to maintain a certain standard of presentation that extended to looking smart and awake shopping in Tesco's on a Sunday morning, even if in reality I was half asleep. There was a constant danger of running into clients there, and so the problem of having to switch from bleary eyed mother to crisp efficient interior designer at the turn of an aisle wasn't unusual. I had to manage the way in which I 'came across',

and that way of coming across differed from the way I would come across at home, or in the pub, or with family, for example. It extended to my clothes as well which were chosen to support a professional image, not chosen because I happened to like them. Note that there were not television programmes starring interior designers then, so I could only take my cues from what others wore at trade shows.

Angela goes to the same trouble when she is meeting work related people. Her style of dress at home is colourful and casual, but out, even on a training course it is smart. Her appearance is taken seriously, and going for a job interview to tide her over/lift her out of the doldrums of her self-employment, she has counselled my opinion by telephone. Should it be the suit, or is that too formal for the preliminaries, and if not, would the dress be a little too frivolous? The conversation as I noted it went something along these lines: *"If only you could see the colour ... I'm not sure if it's too bright ... I mustn't look tarty but it would be worse to look too straight laced, do you think? ... what sorts of things do they wear there ...?"* What to wear was important, and at an interview there was only one chance, Angela had to get it right, because those first impressions would count. Besides, she would feel more confident if she felt that her image supported the professionalism and efficiency she wanted to get over. If she chose the clothes wrongly, misjudged the situation, stood out like a sore thumb, might it not be assumed that she would make errors of judgement elsewhere ...? These were the questions we mulled over on the telephone. Angela didn't get that job, but pulled herself out of the doldrums and bought a mobile telephone. During the months I'd been visiting Angela she had slumped down into a state almost of inertia, and then began to pick herself up again, buying the mobile telephone was, she said, a way of picking herself up and looking businesslike. The



conversation about the telephone began immediately I arrived, it was there on the kitchen table all black and shiny in a tight leather case. I didn't tape the conversation. As women purportedly dance around handbags, we stood at each end of this slither of black plastic and spoke across it. This icon of success was admired and flattered, picked up, turned over, weighed in the palm and its idea resold on value for money (not too expensive really), convenience and kudos. It is now a part of Angela's marketing of herself as professional, busy and/but available anytime and anyplace. It is part of the business kit which goes in the bag every time Angela leaves the house.

More scornful of the 'success image', - you can see the £s in their eyes - Fiona wouldn't own up to taking that much trouble on days when she met clients, and in her case they are usually at country fairs or traditional folk fairs. Yet the jeans and everyday wear are swapped for a folky type skirt and a clean crisp blouse finishes the outfit. Nevertheless I shall not dwell too much on image construction with those actors for whom it wasn't a 'big issue' or a 'task', in other words although I may sit here and recall the appearances of those I talked to, and how it differed on different occasions, where it has not been pointed to, mulled over, deliberated about at all, it seems that I would be turning falling out of bed in the morning and throwing something on, into a grander issue than it probably is. But I'll discuss Alan's 'uniform' by way of a comment that John made. I'd asked him towards the end of an hour or so of conversation how he felt about the good and bad points of being self-employed. He replied with a few words about being used to being solitary and then led into something so practical: *"... and you wear your clothes out differently, I don't wear suits so often."* John works from home for most of the time, and no longer dons a suit to go into an office.

Alan had a special tunic top made for himself with his business logo embroidered onto it. He feels that a smart and professional appearance is crucial both in bringing clients in and whilst they are being treated. Walking around the blustery dusty corner of the street where Alan works one morning, I was met with the incongruous sight of Alan in the distance standing in his doorway, smartly attired in his tunic top and dark trousers, greeting shoppers with a 'good morning' and a smile as they hurried past towards the market place. He stood beside his signboard deliberately and consciously marketing himself for all he was worth, unfortunately recalling in my mind the early morning street scenes of butcher and greengrocer spreading out their wares and the 'who will buy' scene from the musical Oliver. Marketing is a big preoccupation for Alan, he feels very much that he is not operating his business to its full potential, and doesn't miss any opportunity to have a go at increasing his client base. Street vending aside, the medium he prefers to use above all others, is the written word.

### **Image construction through the written word**

This is so for many of my actors. It seems that when they first decide to go into business they begin to plan their logos, their letterheads, their price lists and images. So I want to take this on by looking at literature and the uses of by my actors, and I realise that they apply the sort of who, what, where, when, why, thoughts to it in much the same way as I formulate my thoughts about this and note them down on paper. Then on the paper these may be read, modified, rejected, directed. We write for ourselves to clarify our ideas, and maybe doodle or sketch the image, logo or letterhead that we fancy using. Perhaps we share it with others, certainly my actors have sought such feedback from me on their logos and name changes. Then the details are honed down and refined, prices inserted,

messages crispened up a bit and thus the written word starts to earn its living too. For some these words go ahead of them, on the top of letters courting work, or passed as business cards from hand to hand, printed in the papers or posted in response to a telephone enquiry. For others they are that little extra weight which supports their face-to-face interaction, something someone can take away with them to look at later, to remind them of a meeting.

For some of the actors after the initial idea of going into self-employment had been explored, the name came next. The name is important, many pointed out how long it took them to think of one they would be happy with. It was usual for the business name to be the first thing I saw when contacting a new actor, it gave me my first impressions of what the business might be like, how big it might be, and what it did. My search for these actors was not driven by the same needs as their clients' search however. Their business names tended to disguise how large or small their company was, where it was based, how long the business had been established, who the proprietor was and remarkably, in many cases, what in fact the business did!

So the name was important, whether giving an impression of perhaps a larger company than one actually was, or perhaps the impression of authenticity, as some, like Fiona, an artist, kept her own name. As Strauss (1969) notes, names are not to be taken for granted, they carry with them impressions. And names, and their choosing are a part of becoming self-employed.

### **Business cards**

This was so for Eric whose business name reflected only what he wanted it to reflect, and there was no clue in it that Eric was a sole trader, a one man band. His card told a client what services were offered, and that they were being offered by a reliable company, there was little need for subheadings, or supplementary text, the name said it all. Eric used the name in local papers to advertise his services, in the local Yellow Pages, and in the local Enterprise Agency's booklet of new businesses. In a sense once he released this compact statement onto the locality via the newspapers, he could let that do his marketing for him and sit back to await calls. Of course his business cards were always to hand and as a subtler form of marketing were whipped out as our interview concluded, and I left as I have done from many actors, with a heap of cards to spread around anyone I felt might have a use for them. Eric's cards were advertisements and so could continue to give out his message whenever they were passed on. Craig's business name performed a very similar function to Eric's, and his cards were similar. So their names did a similar job, either through the local newspapers or as cards were passed or picked up, delivering a marketing message, inviting potential clients to use them, or reminding existing clients where they were and how they could be contacted. Sonya was still cautiously expanding her client base through word of mouth commissions, and had just had new business cards printed when I visited her. Her business name is on the card, and describes what she does, and so is her own name. The cards are a flowery design and although they were ordered with the words already printed on them, the artwork is transferred on by Sonya, she's got a little stamping machine for embellishing the script with gilt flowers. Sonya made one up for me whilst I was with her, and planned to stockpile a few more that evening. Sarah, the jewellery maker, Fergus the computer

consultant, John the computer software designer, Anthony the scientist, Maurice the crafts producer, Thomas the sports equipment designer, and indeed several of the other actors had business names which gave very little indication of what they actually did, or produced or offered. Subtitles in advertisements or on cards gave sometimes a clearer indication, but very often first impressions were misleading. And indeed I found it very possible to conduct an interview with a self-employed person and get through an hour or more of conversation without establishing clearly in my mind what services or products they were offering, even whether I might be a potential customer or not.

The artists and writers amongst my actors used their own names on their cards, and for their business name, and didn't advertise in local newspapers. Their contacts were developed through quite formalised routes, either through regional arts associations or galleries, or national organisations operating exclusively in their field. As a marketing task around constructing her image Fiona, for example, was careful about which galleries she exhibited in, she wanted to be in regions in which her work would sell, in galleries which were not too high brow, but not in corner shops where her prices would far exceed those of mass produced work. For the artists, business cards were their previous work, their portfolio, and it would be this that I was shown when I visited. Likewise the writers would show me their work, their books and their articles as representations of what they did, as proof of what they were. Such things as business cards, letterheads and leaflets would take second place in importance. A business card may not be a biography, but the collection of words on it are chosen to represent oneself in business to others, whom one might never meet. This is also the case with advertisements, and much angst goes into the cost of these, perhaps more than the content.

### Using and choosing a public sphere

Advertisement sales executives will suggest a number of reasons why a business should advertise in a local paper, on the radio, or the television, for example. These reasons may include getting customers, but may also include increasing the status of a business in a community, showing the competition that you're still in the field, promoting one's company as environmentally friendly and so on. For the actors who advertised locally, their primary concern was to draw in new clients, any other concerns in their first year or so of trading were considered a luxury. To give some idea of the scale of advertising costs and their importance, we should note that Patricia spent all of her first lump sum from the Enterprise Agency on advertising her first publication. Alan has tied himself into local advertising in brochures at the health centres which has committed him to hefty payments for two years. He regrets this as he has had no business from these advertisements, and yet he now has to divert money from clients merely to pay for it. Freda has found herself caught out by advertising commitments also, and has signed up for more than she feels she should have. However, she is keen to develop parts of the business that are not on her doorstep, and to do this she is bound into other mediums. We discussed a magazine she advertises in to promote the non-horsey side of her work: *"I mean people can't get the quality of stuff in the pet shops and they want you know, we can make it exactly as they want it, I mean those orders have come through an advert in the dog magazine, and it's international, people subscribe to it from you know all sorts of different places and we got some enquiries from America. Then we moved to another one and we've had like a lot of local interest well we did in the other one too but it was costing us more ... When people order from us they come back, it's just getting them to make the order in the first place*

*that's what is difficult."* "Why is that difficult?" *"Well because you know, taking photographs so people can actually see what we do and send little cuttings of leather so people can see the quality of the leather like the colours, I think it's not the same as having it in front of you but then that starts to get costly when you start including colour photographs and things, but um we've got a friend that would scan it on her computer for us so I mean if we can do that and run a few off and see how that works then ..."* One of Freda's clients seemed to get used to a regular advertisement:

*"There was that lady that kept ordering things and she wrote back and said why don't you put another advert in the Times, and then she'd written and said she hoped we had plenty of work and not that we'd stopped doing it."* So Freda suspected that there was a perceived cost to her withdrawing advertisements, as it might be thought that she had gone out of business, but she couldn't afford to keep running them just so that her past clients would not worry about her. Martin's perspective is:

Martin: *"It's just trying to justify the amount of advertising, I mean [turning to Freda] that was expensive wasn't it, £70 for a one-off and we only got her from it?"*

Freda: *"But she wants another one."*

Martin: *"But it doesn't cover the cost."*

Freda to me: *"I mean, I put a run in ... you get a few replies ..."*

Martin: *"But you get such a small response, if you're lucky you'll cover the cost of the advertising and you might make yourself a couple of pennies out of it, but really you'll only break even,[then turning to me] I mean its hardly worth taking the time out to make the advertisement let alone the items, so Freda has found out."*

And Freda to me: *"I mean I put six months of advertising in ..."*

Martin: *"You said it was three months!"*

*"Well it was three months to start with, anyway its nearly over now we've only got one month to go, but we've had quite a lot of response from that, but it's actually getting the work, like some people will ring and want details just for the sake of seeing things but because we haven't got a colour catalogue people can't see it so whether they're put off by that I don't know, we've had people that do come and they're worthwhile, because they want things that in the shops they'd probably pay about £7 for and I've said £25 and they're happy with that ..."*

The bone of contention still gets chewed over, and visiting Freda on a later occasion she was rather glum as the advertising 'disagreement', - she didn't go so far as to call it a row - had sparked off again that morning before her arrival at the workshop. That day she was called by an advertisement representative for a large local weekly paper. I commented on the incident and my thoughts about it as I drove home later. " ... she got a 'phone-call today from someone trying to sell her advertising, display advertisements in a special feature called 'Personally Recommended'. Freda took all of the details and was on the 'phone quite some time doing this. I felt that she was well on the way to being sold on this one, but what she in fact did was ask the person to hang on for a moment while she speak to her 'other half'. I started to chuckle at this, because in the absence of Martin I realised that she must mean me. She asked my advice and I did venture my opinion, unfortunately without any knowledge of the coverage of the paper, its circulation rate' its readership profile, its publication dates, charges or who else was advertising. So the advice I gave her was based on my past experiences in advertisement sales! ... Again I asked her if she'd not talked to me, and we had not chatted at length about the merits and pitfalls of advertising, who she would have spoken to. She said she really didn't know, and that she'd had such



*problems before, as she said the trouble is she's too easily sold on things and too easily says yes."*

### **Finding clients**

The purpose of advertising is usually to find clients, sell products, generate business. Finding clients in the early stages of becoming self-employed is quite crucial. Indeed Angela informed me that she had had to establish relationships with three clients and supply evidence of such to qualify for financial assistance from the local Enterprise Agency. In other words it wouldn't be sufficient to imagine that one had a market for one's product or service, it was necessary to go out and find it, and indeed get it to sign on the dotted line. Paying attention to hunting out markets, to promoting one's work on a frequent and regular basis may take the lion's share of the time being spent being self-employed. Indeed on a later visit to Freda's I noted to the tape recorder on the way back how little work Freda had managed to get round to doing that day, and how it was so like my memories of self-employment: "... as she said herself 'I intended to get so much done today and I've hardly done any of it'. It reminds me of being self-employed, you start with the best of intentions and then you get loads of interruptions and at the end of the day you feel as if you haven't got any productive tasks done. Certainly finding the space to do any marketing is a problem. She did say with these photocopies 'the problem is that if I don't get them out then the work simply won't come in, because they are what will generate future work'."

Generating future work or finding clients seems to demand a lion's heart too. It has been portrayed by many of the actors in this study as a "scary", disempowering, demotivating and haphazard affair. It was with me too, I never really knew where the next job would come from. I found myself

doing up the local registry office as a result of an informal chat whilst there registering Joe's birth. So the paths through which work arrived were not necessarily very easily replicated. And if this environment is a free market environment at all, it certainly seems to be for the self-employed. Clients are not entrapped into relationships with these actors, they are wooed and won, but free to go elsewhere (Freidson, 1968). In these early and developing phases of self-employment clients are more often new than regular, regularity has not developed, relationships are not yet formed, human interactions not yet familiar and relaxed.

Alan talks frequently of the 'hundreds and hundreds of people out there' who would benefit from his services, particularly the elderly, achey or injured. As such he sees them all as his potential clients, but has various ways of trying to suggest to them that they are in need of what he has to offer. He has decided that as he has to charge a fee for his remedial work there are certain groups that this will deter, such as those on a low income, who tend to live in particular and easily identified areas. So he has targetted different areas for his leaflet drops, the larger detached houses on estates in the outlying villages: *"I mean I set off in the morning, six o'clock in the morning and I go round the houses before nine o'clock ... Rather than if I go round now I'm not available you see, whereas if I go round early morning when they wake up and see that, [the leaflet] apart from the dog waking them up, I mean, there's probably odd ones where the dog barks and wakes them. I mean, if you're there at seven o'clock in the morning and they don't wake until half past eight you've probably lost a customer you know! But the people that's come to us, even the older ones anyway - and I haven't been pushing out at council houses only the better ones, because if they're going to have a decent garden they're going to have a decent house and - they will tend to look after themselves*

*so they're not going to put up for a couple of weeks with a pain in their back, whereas the people in council houses when they become out of work they tend to let themselves go ..."*

Alan never seems to stop thinking about how to encourage more clients to him and is always looking for new sectors and markets to explore. A recent visit by a teacher, who talked about the stresses and strains of his job, prompted Alan to mailshot the local schools. From this he also decided to contact the universities and send them some leaflets to display. Regrettably simply sending leaflets doesn't mean that they magically get through to the person with back ache or the sports teacher with a muscle injury, it would be quite difficult to trace which leaflets got into staff rooms and which ended up in someone's bin. Alan imagines that they end up in staff rooms, and talks to me about how the teachers will come in at their breaktimes for a coffee and perhaps complain to one another of their fatigue. He explains that then someone will look up at his leaflet on the notice board and decide to give him a try. He imagines this quite clearly, and tells me a little story about how his leaflets will be noticed. He gave me the same idea about how his leaflets would find him clients on the upmarket estates, explaining that there he would gain custom out of the 'keeping up with the Jones' ' mentality. He would be seen leaving or arriving at a house to give private remedial treatment to a client and curtains would twitch as neighbours began to think to themselves that they should be purchasing Alan's skills and treatments as well.

Patricia has been quite clear about the idea that there are different markets for her different books, but I suspect that as she writes she has an audience in mind to a certain extent just as I have. She imagined how

her books would be received as she prepared to market them to large institutions. She felt that managers would not take them seriously in certain institutions if they realised that they were authored by a woman. She therefore targeted these establishments with leaflets omitting her prefix, however, later seeking to expand her market, she found an area where she felt that the prefix would work to her advantage. Patricia like Alan has taken steps to imagine herself into the shoes and minds of her target clients, but like Alan these target client groups seemed to have emerged, or the thought of them been triggered by chance happenings, thoughts or suggestions. And Freda too isn't sure how she hit on the idea that Americans might adore her ornate dog collars if she ever got around to making them, but she is pretty sure that the way she will find them will be through the Internet: *"... we feel that if we can get to America, you know, get our products to America that we would do quite well up there, because they seem to go for that sort of product, they want the best for their animals ... I mean I shouldn't say this personally, I mean we've got a dog yet she hasn't got a fancy collar, in fact she hasn't got a collar on! But, um, you know, I'd probably personally wouldn't go out and buy an expensive collar for my dog ... we haven't actually got a computer, um, so this is electronic Yellow Pages um, they'll set it all out. If we actually give them the information they'll set it out, you get two pages, four photographs, um there's no saddlers and pet shops at the minute he [the Yellow Pages representative] seems to think that we would get work from America and from the top end of the market that we want because people with the Internet can afford computers so they can tend to afford, well they're the sort that can afford that sort of thing for their pets."*

Although of course the marketing tasks are not all only about being self-employed but entail a fair amount of doing - particularly in Alan's case as

he gets up at the crack of dawn to leaflet drop - they are about the self-employed person becoming self-employed, imagining their interactions with others, seeing others as their patients, clients, customers.

### **Gender**

When I began this study I didn't seek out actors by gender, indeed if their business name didn't give me such a clue I wouldn't know if I was going to be speaking to a woman or a man when I initially telephoned. That the main participant observation time was spent more with women than with men I feel is irrelevant, as was the fact that more of the actors in this study were in their thirties than sixties. So I almost didn't consider gender at all. I do so now only in so far as a gendered self might be employed, just as in becoming in any new career one employs attributes of one's self, skills or smiles in a new role. I don't think one necessarily always consciously employs a gendered self, but I do suspect that it is occasionally brought into play, rather like pulling rank if the need arises. So I'm going to discuss only the ways in which actors have consciously appeared to draw upon their gender to support their way of being self-employed, and also look at how they deal with demands by others towards their gendered person. So as these actors are becoming self-employed and setting about them processes and ways of being and doing to support this, their gender roles may be attributes they bring to the job, sometimes self consciously and sometimes not. And as far as others such as clients' friends or family are concerned, their gender may not be something they can leave behind, it goes everywhere with them.

This was so for Sarah, who it seemed was not going to shake her role as housewife, but adapt her self-employment around that. As Sarah talked to me about her business she gave the impression of being very much one

half of a couple. Her presence only filled a little of the lounge, which was spotless and smelled of polish with that just cleaned feel to it. Sarah, it seemed to me, had a neatness about her, and, I suspected, was responsible for the neatness around us in the house. The space was ordered, nothing was in an unexpected place, the contents of the lounge coordinated and suited each other. Sarah sat very small on a chair near to me, and both of us were near the door, hardly making an impression on the room at all. She played down her role in business, stating that she wasn't an entrepreneur and didn't see herself as a business woman, more as someone that was fortunate enough to have found a talent to keep her busy and employed. There were, for Sarah, no virtues to self-employment, only vices, and as I discuss later, these were the ways in which her work intruded into her and her husband's orderliness as a couple. I'm not sure Sarah saw the way she managed her business and the odd difficulties it presented as anything at all to do with gendered expectations, but I felt that she certainly found her partner's limited - indeed scarce - involvement acceptable and unsurprising. Her amusement when I asked her about support from family seemed to imply that although not against Sarah's work, her partner was patiently waiting for her to get a 'proper' job, but it was alright for her to indulge herself in a little hobby for a while. It was OK for her to do what she was doing as long as it was discreet. Sarah it seemed to me, had bought into this attitude, and I felt that she displayed almost embarrassment about what she did for a living.

Alan is always conscious that his gender will influence his business and who his clients are. Dealing with sports injuries is about dealing with the body, so he feels it is imperative to put over a detached and impersonal image. This he does by wearing a clinical looking tunic or white top with his logo on it. The uniform he feels gives over a professional image. In

addition he doesn't mention that his sports injuries and sprains treatments include remedial massage in his advertising literature. He can't always be with his literature when it is being read, to ensure the appropriately professional meaning is drawn from it. He fears misinterpretations and humour will give his business an inappropriate image. Hiding gender, or references which might make readers uneasy about gender, is possible in advertising literature, it's done quite simply by avoiding pronouns and titles. This practice has been adopted by Patricia, who feared that her work would not be taken seriously in a particular domain were it known that she was a woman writer. In my trade my name was often read as a misprint of Julian, so I was frequently written to or telephoned as a man, and clients or suppliers would ask to be put through to Julian when I answered the telephone. This didn't concern me, at the time I didn't *consciously* use my gender or obscure it. In my work I changed hats frequently. At the drawing board gender was not questioned, sometimes on site it was commented upon, but I tended to dress practically for the building site, and felt that had I not shown myself as being able to dress myself appropriately, my skills at dressing a building would have been questioned too. Comments most frequently came if I was fitting curtains myself. I only had one curtain fitter and so if work was busy I'd do the fitting too. This entailed being skilled with a power drill, skilled enough to drill into anything from oak to damp plaster and get a fixing. If other skilled manual workers were on site they tended to be men, (indeed I don't recall meeting another woman on a site unless it was a florist) and then there might be offers of help with the fitting, and surprise that I'd rather do it all myself. But it was imperative for me that I did do the job well, had I slipped with the drill or gouged out too big a hole in a wall then I'd not have carried off the role of competent person at all. I suspect that my care and precision were greater than those of the men on sites who perhaps did not

have to prove their competence. I employed myself as curtain fitter because I knew that I could do the job well. My other curtain fitter, a man, was I always thought, better than me, not for his prowess with the power drill but because he could hold it with one hand and vacuum up the dust with the other at the same time, and he changed into carpet slippers before entering clients houses! I suspect that had I used slippers and vacuum cleaner, they would have been seen in my hands as gendered appliances, and the power drill would have been snatched away from me.

Angela didn't obscure her gender, she used it and nurtured it. Coming back up again from her depressed and inactive period, she did: "*lots of girly things like buying makeup and things that I don't normally buy ... it's tied up with this creation of me stuff, it's all tied in with OK what do you want and to me it's as important towards me as a business person as it is towards me as an individual because once I get a taste for these things hopefully that will inspire me to work to earn more of them.*" How she presented herself was important, and she presented herself as a woman person.

Angela was conscious and indeed proud of being a woman, Alan, equally conscious masked his gender with a uniform. And Patricia and I, although not with such deliberation also masked or played down gender in our work. But of course there are those that make demands of our gendered roles, or comment when gender and role don't seem to fit together to them. Freda has no problems being a woman and a saddlery maker, as she points out there seem to be many more women than men in equestrian pursuits and plenty of women saddlers. Had she been a farrier that might have been a little different. But she is taken as Freda the carer, Freda the food getter by Martin, the children and friends, put into roles



which have traditionally been gendered. And Briony too when we talked in her home, was taken as the half of the couple that could cope with looking after the little one whilst we were talking. Briony and her partner are both self-employed in different but homebased work. However, it is her work which must fit around other roles traditionally gendered, the childcare, trips to nursery and food preparation. Her work is frequently done in those parts of the house within reach of the other jobs, whereas her partner is able for more hours of the day to make use of the purpose built studio upstairs.

It seems to me that as we carve out a self-employed self we may make a choice about the proportion of gender we include, whether we bring it forward or keep it hidden, but it is not very easily entirely hidden, and why should it be? We have moved away from discussing the way in which we come across to others in this last topic of part two. We have slipped once again into discussing the compromises or balances between our working and other selves. These are I feel compromises demanded of us by others on many occasions. So the self-employed woman will not be at liberty to forget the duties of mother self or carer self, but must adapt each to accomodate the others.

### **Summing up part II**

In part two of this chapter we have looked at the ways in which the self-employed actors in this study have gone about marketing themselves and their businesses, and how they have chosen to express what and who they are to clients. The tasks in doing this have been difficult, sometimes tedious, and involved some careful thinking. Less of a task and more of an adaptation has been the tackling of gender where it might influence or interfere with business.

### **Summary of chapter**

The chapter as a whole has looked at the consciously deliberated ways in which these self-employed actors have started to put together those ways of being and doing which will enable and facilitate their self-employment. The compromises of chapter three have been worked out into processes in chapter four. The processes are about putting little structures into place, or systems and ideas into action to support the day-to-day management of self and activities. These processes are also about constructing a self-employed self out of existing selves, bringing past experiences to bear on new situations or perhaps not being able to leave old habits behind. In this thesis, this is as close as we get to seeing the business person up and running and interacting: Their interactions are predominantly with themselves.

## **Chapter Five, Frames**

The self-employed self is, through our usage of it and its usage by others, not a separated self intent upon entrepreneurial pursuits it would seem. Rather this self is an embedded self in the temporal and spatial activities that are related to the rest of ourselves and our other roles and responsibilities. As these actors work to create themselves as self-employed, the distinctions between these other selves, roles and activities and relationships, times and spaces are struggles and conflicts. But of course we wouldn't have things differently, few of us would go so far as to sever all old ties in pursuit of new ones, and certainly not many of us would forsake family completely to pursue our careers. And I suspect in our intentional becoming that we don't want the doors behind us to close when we push new ones open. Besides, even if we want them to, there are going to be those that won't let them.

In the last chapter we discussed the processes through which actors became self-employed. These processes were seen as the ways of putting into action the intentions, sometimes compromises, discussed in chapter three. The processes involved learning about the sorts of procedures that might help businesses to run. They were procedures that would become resources such as having the mobile telephone to hand, putting out leaflets to attract customers or clients, or working out a price list and having it to hand when clients called. There has been an underlying economic imperative which has taken actors from dream world to reality through process, through doing, willingly, or reluctantly. This economic imperative has not been the subject of study for this thesis, nevertheless external pressures do impinge upon the development of the

self-employed doing and being, as touched upon at the end of the last chapter in terms of gender.

These pressures are those which are part of our everyday lives anyway, and which we cannot 'bracket out' to do self-employment. I perceive them as frames within which we manage and of which we are conscious. There are the quite natural literal frames such as space, say, nation, or locality or countryside or our street, and the contestedly abstract frame of time, say, now, or at this stage in our career or parenthood or tomorrow's deadline. This chapter is about these frames and the frames which are constructed out of the expectations of others; our families and friends. I don't want to give the impression that we are entirely at the mercy of these natural or constructed frames, but I do want to acknowledge that the self-employed path to greater autonomy is a journey of compromises and payoffs.

### **Time**

This section is about time frames, time as a frame or marker, sometimes a boundary which we use to make sense of what we do and how we do it. In this section I shall consider first my time frames as a researcher and then the way in which these actors made sense of things through, and over, time. I shall look at how they find time and make particular times for things, and then discuss a course about making the best use of time which Angela chose to go on and on which I accompanied her. I shall then look at how one's time sometimes seems to be determined by others, and how with some of these actors, times of motherhood have been ways in which sense is made of self-employment.

I'll begin with something I found in my notes: *"At the moment I'm feeling very self-employed. I'm having to generate my own work, motivate myself ... and fight my own tiredness ... and that's one of the things I'm finding hard ... I was thinking that's the trouble with unstructured time. If you're not working all the time you feel guilty, it's very hard to give yourself time off. I'm wondering how many hours as a self-employed person or student I'm putting into my work. It seems like a lot and yet in some ways it seems very little, there's nothing to guide me ... I mean, I do pinch time at the weekends ... but I seldom get that opportunity ... and there's no division of labour in self-employment, at the end of the day how much do I do that is actually productive? I look at my office and think how spread out I am, with little piles of work all over the place and correspondence and things and of course I need to tidy all that up and file it and that's work too, I have to do that and sometimes I do that at a weekend or in the evening; administration and filing. Without doing that I couldn't support myself, couldn't support my work so it has to be done ... There's the issue that supportive rather than productive tasks when divided between people are coterminous, whereas in self-employment they are consecutive, they happen at different times, and sometimes we perhaps prioritise time, so some hours are more valuable than others ..."*

I was experiencing the same sort of organisational problems that I described Freda as having in the last chapter. These were my worries when I felt a bit overwhelmed by work, and as I noted earlier they were Eric's too: *"I haven't got time to do a lot of things, there's help on hand but no time to look into it."* And we might return to John's words, used in the previous chapter: *"Of course you know the problem with being self-employed is that you can actually only be with one customer at any one time."*

These thoughts illustrate, I think, a sensitivity that I have been developing about time over the course of this study. I am aware that my time as I visit actors has to dovetail into theirs, and this is not necessarily easily accomplished. The evening telephone calls to or from actors are, I feel, a less intrusive way sometimes of keeping in touch, and provide the opportunity for us to reflect upon our day at dusk, when the work is done, or the children in bed, when people do telephone each other, have a chat, catch up on things, reflect in a 'natural attitude' about their day, week and so on. But each visit to actors is intrusive, and each visit after the first a revisit, in which issues are revisited, themes recur and time plays over again some of the things we've played over before. If I'm sometimes the catalyst for rethinking and change, I may as often be the ghost of visits past, so that the same issues are redredged. This is so for Alan, who on almost every visit greets me with new strategies for bringing in more clients. As I write this he has telephoned me with more tactics and news, and I wonder uncomfortably if he is aware that he is saying the same things over and over again now, and whether I mark time for him. But this is so with family and friends too surely. A relative telephones and asks how you are doing, you might respond in the same way as last time, feel you have had that conversation before. I think this illustrates what has become apparent already in previous chapters; that time has for these actors and myself, to do with stretches of sameness, a circularity of thoughts, repetitions of tasks and then sometimes change, watersheds, punctuation marks.

We move on to discuss the way in which some of these actors 'found the time', or 'made time' for their tasks. I begin with Patricia, who as I have noted, made sense of her life so it seemed, in terms of her longevity.

Patricia seems capable of carrying many time frames in her head, and felt it necessary, much to my amusement, to translate for me what to her seemed a genuinely misleading statement: *"all my plays I've planned, until the end of the century - this century ..."*! We were discussing time quite explicitly on that occasion, and Patricia was explaining to me the way in which, as her work is changing, more time is being devoted to playwriting, and less to the non-fictional texts, which merely need orders keeping up to date: *"... so I'm letting the play writing assume major importance."* When we first met, Patricia was still writing the non-fictional works, she explained that then she spent most of the day writing, stopping at 11am when the post came to deal with orders. She had, she said, a target of twenty four hours to turn orders around in. The arrival of the post was for her a trigger to stop her productive work and deal with administrative work. Patricia talks about her time; big time, middle time, and little time, as life time, work time and post time.

Alan sets himself regular times for his work, or, as I think he would say being in work or at work. We were discussing the long hours he puts in:

Alan: *"... when I come in on the morning I sometimes push leaflets through doors."* (He leaves early to do this on the way in.)

Jill: "You're leaving the house at half past six in the morning! And when people come to you they tend to come outside working hours, so you're working a very long day aren't you!"

*"Well I didn't deliver any this morning like, but I think you need to do that don't you."*

"What about the middle of the day, do you take a break at lunchtime?"

*"Well I mean, I haven't had anybody this morning yet so it's not as if I'm working solidly ... I mean, I set off in the morning, six o'clock in the morning and I go round the houses before nine o'clock rather than if I go*

*round now I'm not available you see ... what it means is you've got to work harder, harder all the time to get whatever work that you do get ..."*

We talked about how Alan might set aside a time for marketing, to increase his client base.

*"... you never know the exact places to go to in Durham, I'll work on that for a period of time rather ... see what happens, with that, maybe drop in Hartlepool. At the moment I'd say like, some days I see nobody at all, you always feel you can sit back and there's a hope of someone coming in as I say ... What I've got to do is get away for a day, take things [posters and leaflets] somewhere and use the whole day. The idea of er looking for business say, that day, I'm not having any business, well say they could come to me on a night-time, but say work eight hours solid somewhere pushing the business. You know questions of Monday, Tuesday and even Friday in fact, I'm getting very few people in Friday because Friday people are going to be, you know, preparing for the weekend, they want to look good and they maybes haven't got time see ... see Friday's social time so they don't come to see me, see maybe if I was in the right place I'd get more business, but see I'm not getting business here on Friday like. Even Saturday is very quiet there's a man normally comes on three o'clock on Saturday ... but think I've got to resign myself to say why [well], on a particular day I'm getting no business over eight hours and with that eight hours I'm going to work solid in searching for business. That's how I've got to work you know, me mind is towards getting business, but when it's not coming you've got to look at what to do. I've got to look at who to see in Darlington and the right places to go to and see how many posters to get done ..."*



Alan works to the same sort of times that he did in the past in steel works employment, and has retained the notion of clocking in, staying put in his room once he arrives, only 'nipping out' for a sandwich at lunchtime. He has a strong sense that in working hours he should be on the premises, and despite discussing setting a day aside for marketing the business, he has in fact done it only very rarely. For Alan time seems to be something that he doesn't take ownership of, in contrast to Patricia who sees it in many very different measures and packages it to suit her. Making time and having enough time was a problem for Angela, for whom the edges of different times were blurred, family time merged with work time and so on. So she was curious about time management coming up as a topic for a day course offered by the local development agency. So was I, so off we went.

It's funny the way you think something magical will be offered on courses like these, as if all of a sudden at the wave of a magic wand time is going to expand to fit work rather than the other way around. Our initial task on the course was to complete an exercise apparently geared towards identifying our attitude towards time. We were asked to indicate whether we agreed or disagreed with a series of statements. We shared our responses to the statements such as: "*I don't know where time goes*" ,and, "*I can't get on with things because of constant interruptions*", and it became clear that we were all in the same boat.

There were ten of us attending the course, which consisted of a two hour session in the morning, a good hour for lunch and two hours in the afternoon. It appeared that everyone there was in some form or another self-employed, and several were partners of self-employed people, developing supporting businesses in catering services to complement

partners' work. It seems fair to say that, from responses to the first exercise, we all felt that we didn't have enough hours in our days, and were always tired. As if to confirm this one person fell asleep during the afternoon's video presentation! Angela and I talked only a little about what we expected from the course, but mulled it over afterwards, starting with Angela's point that it had been directed at owner managers as employers as well as the self-employed, which presented what to her were obvious problems:

Jill: "You said outside that the best thing about the course was the socialising, not what was said on the course."

Angela: *"Well especially with that course, it was aimed at management, it was very much aimed at, the assumption was, that you had people who delegated, it didn't, there was no information on what you can do when there's nobody else to delegate to."*

"Did you know it was aimed at management before you went?"

*"Yep, but I assumed, or I had thought yes a great part of it wouldn't apply to me but some of it would because there are, as far as I know, certain ways of managing time ... well it goes across the board, it works as well with a housewife as it does with a managing director, but we didn't go into those areas."* "What did you think that it would go into that it didn't?"

*"Just basic time management, just very very basic time management."*

I asked Angela why she felt she needed time management. *"I think it's grasping at straws in so much as I can't make the day long enough. Any tricks I can learn to make the day longer would be good for me."* I commented that she didn't seem to be doing too badly and that recent burning of the midnight oil was, I thought, a result of waiting for others, and not bad management on her own part perhaps. *"Well, I suppose part of it was because I drag my feet and allow myself to become distracted,*

*but no, I would probably have stayed up to that time anyway even if I hadn't, well no, if they hadn't ..."*

So much for the course on time management. It seemed from comments during the day and in the breaks that many were experiencing similar problems to those Angela had; dealing with interruptions, structuring the day and finding the right time for the right task. Angela felt no further forward on a day-to-day basis and still seemed never to have enough time. On a longer timescale she didn't have targets in terms of months or years, although she did on one occasion state that she'd try self-employment until her youngest had finished school. Rather Angela seemed to have indeterminate watersheds. At the outset of our knowing each other she was waiting for the 'big one'. Then she was waiting to be paid for the big one, and we talked about this watershed in these terms: *"It's all part and parcel of the next stage of business."* "I'm getting the idea that this is quite a watershed for you." *"Oh it's an enormous watershed ... I've always assumed that yes, this is something that I'll do one day so it's always been there, at the moment, at this moment in time it's actually an issue, because I know the time has come that I'm actually going to have to jump into the water or go back into the changing room. I'm forced by circumstances to make a decision, which is why it's a watershed now ..."*

We revisited the watersheds frequently, and on of my 'last' visits to Angela we reflected over these times. I pointed out that when I had first been visiting her she was working very long hours. *"Yes, [now] I'm working normal hours, I'm working a lot less, but getting a lot more done, well no, not so much getting more done because I've not had anything so intensive as the big contract, but working has become more a voluntary thing, and I mean, two thirds of the way through it it was a chore ... and I*

*got tied up in this tiny thing and there weren't enough hours in the day, well of course there weren't enough hours in the day, because I was sat watching the bloody telly!"* It was difficult winding up the visiting process, I asked Angela how she had felt about it all. She said that of course my visits had had effects upon her, although she was introspective anyway, but summed it all up as quite harmless: *"... I mean most of what we've talked about has been to do with periods of change ..."*

At the start of this research comments made by a lot of people who were self-employed were that time was a distinctively good thing about being self-employed - you made your own time. But I also heard many comments that time was a bad thing too, and often the same people made both statements. Time was seen as problematic, as clients and customers would call at all hours, they were the ones it seemed who determined how your time was spent or managed. Freda was always at pains to give the best value possible and tended to determine where and when to fit a job in according to her clients 'I want it by tomorrow' requirements. She felt that she was able to set the hours she chose to be in the workshop, but having set them she would have to stick to them. Much as Alan felt that he had to be in his treatment room from 9am until 5pm just in case somebody called. Freda felt the full force of this on the occasion that she turned up late to her workshop, which angered a waiting client. Although Alan felt that he had to be in his workplace between the 'usual' working hours, he didn't think it extraordinary to have to wait for a client to visit him *after* his or her working day had finished. He didn't consider that that was really worth charging a higher fee for, and also didn't consider that perhaps he at least owed himself time off in lieu of this. In addition he would visit clients on his way home, not adding charges or expenses on, but just fitting it in to the travelling he would have to do in that direction anyway.

And it isn't just the clients who determine the time management of the self-employed person. Angela was forever waiting for partners on the 'big contract' to come up with their part of the work so that she could get on with hers. Briony, if she was planning on doing teaching work in between her community arts courses, or indeed doing community arts courses in schools, had to wait until registrations began at colleges and courses filled up before she could determine her commitments for the coming weeks. Sarah too, selling through craft fairs, was obliged to wait for the craft fair season to begin to enable her to sell her jewellery, and to fit in with the times and places of these fairs. But for the rest of her time Sarah can organise her days around making jewellery in her spare room, sitting at a small table by the window, fit into the time when her husband was out at work. And she does this, careful to contain the business within the space of the spare room, and, during the making period, to the time frame of her husband's employment.

When we first spoke, Sarah's only complaint was that her best selling successes were in fairs out of the county, and that meant a lot of travelling. This entailed leaving very early in the morning and returning late at night, sometimes for several days in a row. At the times of the fairs her business was not so discrete, as it broke into the couple's traditional times of being together and being apart. The fairs are seasonal too, and so Sarah had to prepare for a few months of the year in which she would have no income. This was a new way of planning her working life, and involved understanding that there would be lean times, and setting aside the capital to invest in the materials needed to prepare new stock.

In her first year this took some adjusting to, particularly as she said that initially she had the pressure of making and selling all in the same season. She was so engrossed with keeping up with stock and getting to the fairs that she had little time to reflect upon how well she was doing, whether her strategies were appropriate and what she might do to maximise on time and minimise on effort. She expected to turn the lean months to her advantage in this respect by reflecting upon her first year of business whilst building up stock, and using the time to explore new markets. The lean time for her also offered her the opportunity to catch up on accounting work and preparing tax returns.

Sarah was at pains to maintain a lifestyle dominated by traditional work time frames, and she never left tools or bits of jewellery lying around the house. Everything about her business is discrete in the home environment, except her leaving and arriving times on fair days. And it is only this that she complains about, it disorders her otherwise very orderly way of living in her lifeworld.

Sarah is to an extent constrained by 'husband time', or 'partner time', and many of the actors were, if not constrained, then at least organising their lives according to children. This became apparent even in first introductions, as we noted some of the reasons actors chose for going in to self-employment. Hilary, for example, thought about starting a family and wanted to fit work around Molly rather than the other way around. I had wanted a family and had set out into self-employment for this very reason. For Freda it was the same to an extent, and we discussed or rather compared notes on the wrapping of work time around children time: *"... trying to get work done when the children have gone to bed."* "Yes because there's that gap when they're home from school and not yet gone

to bed ..." "Yeh, and you've got to spend time with them otherwise you just end up all heat, you know everybody's in a temper and nobody's happy and so I've just tried to work it around them. Then, you know, because first thing in the morning it's them, then as soon as they've gone to school that's when I start on this and I've still got Little One to contend with as well, and luckily she's really good, you don't give us a lot of grief do you, [to daughter] but now and again she wants to go out walking to see the horses and then I have trouble getting her back up again ... and then you're sort of rushing having to get back for the children and then well maybes you've got shopping in for the dinner and stuff and then when you get home it's children and cooking and things and then when they've gone to bed you start, well, generally more leatherwork and stuff ..."

But I wonder how much distinction is made really between different times, as edges blur very easily for those of us who work from home. If the telephone rings and it's teatime, how many of these self-employed actors would let it ring, not caring if it was a customer or not. I have distinguished between those times determined by oneself in self-employment, and those times determined by others. The autonomy/compromise struggle is not so clear cut. Sometimes I am annoyed that Joe has come up into my office and disturbed my train of thought, other times I remind myself that this is why I am working here, so that he may do just that. The actors in this study, in almost the same breath would categorise time as an advantageous and a disadvantageous factor of self-employment, and so, so do I.

When Freda and I talked about her day-to-day activities we often talked in terms of making more time, and Freda of settling into routines. We discussed it when we talked about whether she should move back to

barns at home to work. The distinctiveness of remunerative activities as opposed to caring for the family were drawn out by Martin who was concerned about time wasting: *"That's the thing about down here, if Freda has to muck about say go into town to get her lunch or something, well, that's three quarters of an hour possibly gone and she's got such a short day anyway ..."* But it seemed to me with most of these actors, that even if they might want to, they made few distinctions between work time, family time or leisure time. It was more a case of wrapping times round each other, and combining activities so that more than one thing got done at a time. For example, Freda discussing the setting up of a repair outlet with a local shop pointed out: *"... if she takes things in we can go and collect it from there once a week, I mean we're always in [the town] well, twice a week at least, and my daughter does ballet on a Monday so I could drop her off at ballet and go and pick the work up, then come back and work it in that way."* The times of work and family and other commitments are threaded together it seems, and determined not so simply by ourselves or others, but through negotiations and expectations between us.

### **Space and place**

There are as many issues to do with place or space and location as there are to do with time. It seems to be a way of breaking down situations when we start to ask what it is that is going on. Ethnographies, usually very early on in the text, work to *locate* the actors. This work does the same, but here in this chapter we look less at locality and more at the place of work of actors, how they construct this, and how it fits in with other's places and their own other places. This chapter is about how embedded in the rest of their lives and the lives of their families self-employment activities are. Space as well as time, although a palpable and visible concept, is something that may also be complexly interwoven as work



activities overflow workshop boundaries, or marketing activities take work out of the locality and, for example, onto the Internet.

As I am writing this Ian is drilling holes in my office wall at home and fitting a new desk up for me. Soon the old wardrobe will move in there to become a filing cabinet and once again, for the first time in over a year, I will have an acceptable workspace at home. But I'm working here in the university on a Sunday afternoon whilst this is being done, as I still feel at the moment that I need a distinction in place between work and home. And I find others here on a Sunday afternoon who feel the same. Indeed a sense of workplace and working from home became so important that I wrote about it for a conference and seminar. I'm sure its no accident now that I was ill in the spring, at about the time I had finished transcribing all my tapes and assessing all my notes. I became unwell and very tired. Feeling slothful and miserable I struggled to write more than a sentence at a time in my study, and staggered every few minutes, or so it seemed, to the garden for a cigarette and recovery break. This went on for some time before I finally spoke about it, before I finally realised that I needed to admit that I wasn't working. I did admit it; however, if I'd remained in the splendid isolation of study and garden I would have continued to struggle alone. I felt that I had got myself into the same problems that Angela and Alan experienced; I was employing myself badly, and getting away with it to begin with because there was no-one there to witness it, the frame was empty except for me.

Coinciding with my recovery an article in The Times used the polemic headline 'Study Points to Pitfalls of Working From Home' to head up extracts from a report I'd contributed to. I was dismayed as here I had been wanting to say look, the way in which we work at home, alone, in our

own spaces and in our own times may be isolating, sometimes liberating or downright frustrating, but nevertheless it is a valid way of working and being: it's OK. But I feel rather hoisted on my own petard as my own recovery route was to return to the university department and embed myself in the structured time and space that it presented.

Some of the actors in this study work from home and some have work places elsewhere. Alan has never worked from his own home, he felt that in his line of work he needed to have a formal setting in which to conduct remedial massage work and treat sports injuries. But many of the actors felt that one of the greatest advantages of being self-employed was that they could work from home, reduce their overheads and perhaps be in the right place to be parent at the same time. Anthony, for example, saw it as convenient that he could very easily take a turn in looking after the children when his wife went out to her part time work. As he said this, however, he cast his eyes around the room and said that of course there were a few things he could really do with in the room that it just wasn't possible to fit in. Jenny had her work area very well sorted out, with everything she needed for effective communication, and a tidy filing system that left me in no doubt as to her efficiency.

An expensive hardwood furnished the office, and there was sufficient space for two visitor's chairs. Light and airy, wall to wall files left no doubt that this space was business. Anthony and Jenny were not unusual in having work places at the back of their houses, which involved taking clients or such as me through domestic areas to reach the business region. Many actors didn't take me through to these back places, but we talked in their 'front' rooms, locations given over to receiving visitors. Sarah for example, whose perspective on her work was discussed earlier

in terms of time, brought me into her 'front' room / lounge / living room to discuss her work, and disappeared upstairs to bring examples of her work down to show me. Light furnishings and carpets in pristine condition advertised Sarah and her partner as clean, efficient and well groomed, and without children. There was a newness too to the furnishings in keeping with the newness of the estate on which the house was located. Sarah lives on an executive style estate in a new out of town development in the north east. It's the style of estate that doesn't have hedges or fences around the fronts of the houses. Everyone's front garden and drive is neatly paved, lawns neatly trimmed and laid bare for all to see. The estate is a cul de sac, heavy traffic or large vehicles would be an unusual sight save for the odd domestic appliance service van. The very size of Sarah's products suits the scope of that environment, everything can be neatly boxed and loaded into the car boot, and deliveries from her suppliers all come through the post.

Maurice also brought me into his 'front' room, and only when I expressed an interest in seeing his work did he point out that in fact we were surrounded by it, as the models he had made decorated the hearth and book cases. Visiting Fergus I was greeted by the smell of freshly ground coffee as I was ushered into the family's 'front' room, and on a second occasion, as I handed up the milk to him from the doorstep I was met by the smell of toast too. Place intersects with time here of course, I wouldn't pick up the early morning town house smells if the house were not near Joe's school and so my visits immediately followed the school walk. It's not widely known' or obscured' that Fergus works from home, but naming the business after the house tends to disguise this, and as noted earlier there are commercial properties at the other end of this long street.

Alan and Freda had work places away from their homes. The issues they discussed concerning their place of work were different from those above, and different from each other to an extent. Alan had known his landlord for some time, so when he gained his qualifications and started to look for premises, it was an easy step for the owner of the hairdressers to sublet a room at the back of his building. The benefits were seen as mutual. Alan felt that to start within the context of another, established business would help him attract clients. Those coming to the salon would get to know him, and pass the word around. It didn't occur to Alan not to set up in his home town, with the necessity of keeping overheads low it was important that he was in an area that he could easily cycle to. In addition, Alan was very cautious about his overheads, pointing out to me that rented premises usually involved signing up to long term contracts or leases, and that was too risky for him. In some respect Alan is concerned about the impression he makes on others, particularly his clients, and has talked at some length about his concerns and consciousness of how he should manage these impressions. I have wondered whether the link with the hairdressing salon was a good idea, and whether Alan wants his work associated with services other than those with some sort of health orientation. Discussing his location he commented that a client had asked him the very same thing, adding that he would keep his ears open for more sports-like locations. Alan reported his response to the client: *"I said because of the volume they're getting, a lot of flow coming in, I do know quite a few there, they're not coming to see me but with a lot of people there's a barrier to break, so therefore, I mean, they would always push my name forward if someone talked of a back problem."* But his responses are contradictory. On the one hand he is passionate about health matters, on the other hand he feels he has got a good deal from the hairdresser, and that it is well

worth keeping in with him as landlord, business contact and friend. I asked him why he thought that his client had queried the location.

Alan: *"Probably because he thinks it's not the right place for me to be in you know, because it's the same as what you said, about appearance, whereas the, you know, they're looking for their health when they come to see me."*

Jill: "Do you think many people query it?"

*"Probably, there was a man that came I think he was 78 and he felt, it didn't feel right coming through past the hairdressers to come in to see us, and then he was, he said he'd come back in to see us and that..."*

"Did he come back again?"

*"No, but I think with his age, what he had been doing was going through to Sunderland, he was taking his daughter to Sunderland, but I feel as though if his daughter needs that problem solving she would come, he would bring her to see me rather than to Sunderland, because Sunderland is quite ... He would come again I think ... what I could do is always wait at the bottom of the stairs for them, but some people feel as though if I was in the bottom floor more people would come to see us and I would solve that by bringing them up, if I could, help them up the stairs you know ... but I mean, me to have something on the bottom floor I would have to have much, you know, I haven't got the trade to cover that yet."*

"Would you want to at some stage?"

*"Well it depends how my trade would be, you see, I always believe that if you can do people good people will find you, even if you live like somewhere like Wolsingham, or like, that you know they'll search you out, but its how to get through to people to get to know that you're there ..."*

So in the mean time Alan has set up his space to look as professional as he possibly can, even repainting it in cool blues which he tells me are

healing colours. There is a limit to the extent that Alan can manage his space, and he is powerless to manage the impressions that the rest of the building and the staff give off, the cigarette smoke, Radio One banter and chatter, before clients get as far as his treatment room. The upstairs room is not ideal for injured clients. I asked Alan how he imagined himself being in ten years time, and he answered in terms of the sort of place and the sort of market he'd like to have. *"I would get myself maybes customers to the extent at the time where I would decide on the right place the right location because that, that particular man he said there's a lot of money in the area, you know there is, a lot of, still everywhere they get nice houses built and what have you, and people travel ... I think I would want to be in a more affluent area you know, say the likes of Durham where more things are happening because, even, they say like, talk about places like the Enterprise Zone well the people that actually come to employ people are normally giving smaller rates, they're exploiting the situation they went through the different factories around the area and the difference between the North East and the South was amazing, so I mean it might be some time in the future that, that I move from the North East you know, I haven't truly decided at this point in time you know, cos I'm certainly not in a financial position to move anywhere like."* Place, for Alan is intertwined with financial concerns, and the number and type of clients he has, but he also thinks regionally. Freda has very different problems.

One might think that Freda was in the most perfect place possible for her business. Doing saddlery repairs in a workshop above a riding stables should be ideal. Clients and customers on the doorstep should be ideal. However, we have talked over and over again about where Freda should do her work; the set up at the stables is far from taken for granted. The trouble is that Freda is taken to be the glorified childminder by the stable

staff as she has her own children there, and on cold damp mornings the staff 'disappear' from the sludgy yards and drafty barns into Freda's workshop to sit by her fire and have a coffee and chat to warm up. Freda's work activities and family and childcare activities are embedded and intertwined enough as it is she feels, without a further strand of entwining with the stable staff's activities to further complicate things. So, at the time at which I began writing up chapters, Freda has moved out to her home where converting a barn to a workshop means peace and quiet and a meshing of home and work with less aggravation. Her worries about doing this were that customers had got used to where she was, so it was important that she leave a sort of satellite representation at the stables, in the form of a pick up point for repairs. The pick up point will be simply that, not warm space for coffee and a fag, and no interaction in the form of chat and gossip with Freda.

Unfortunately this was what made Freda's workshop so interesting. Entering it one was confronted by a huge wooden bench piled high with leather and tools. Underneath this the area was stuffed again with leather bits and pieces, only slightly more organised since my attempt to sort it out. Further in and tucked around the corner away from the door were a comfy sofa, a fridge and television. Snacks and coffee jars, coloured pens and childrens toys littered the place, so that entering it really felt like discovering some secret den. Freda looked around sometimes and commented that she really must give it a tidy up, put a shelf up here and there. She commented that she'd like to hang her work up and display it better, but didn't get around to it. Everyone acted towards Freda's workshop on the basis of the meaning that it had for them. For Little One it was her home during the day, and her play area. For Freda too it wasn't just a place of work, it was a social area, and her place of working and

mothering during the day. And for the stable staff it was a haven from the cold and damp, it was warm and welcoming. Freda has now however, voted with her feet, and would doubtless empathise with Fiona's words.

Fiona surveying her home commented: *"I'd like more space, a room that nobody else would go into. But I wouldn't like the cost of separate premises"*: Financially constrained to work from the family home, with not enough room for a study or workshop there, she works in the dining room, which is piled high with her paintings and display stands: *"The dining room is completely taken over with all my stuff."* Fiona says that the family resent this, and that the room isn't even big enough for her to spread out all her work whilst she does it. It's not a studio for pots of paint and brushes, she can't leave them out anyway as the children might fiddle with them.

Edward also works from home and although having a designated work room complained that it took some time for the rest of the family to accept that he was actually working not merely pursuing a hobby. Interruptions only ceased and the seriousness of his work finally appreciated when the first cheques came in, evidence that he wasn't merely fiddling about.

Patricia on the other hand, and despite being so temporally described, always gave the impression of being able to work just about anywhere in the house, although she had a study, and during our time of talking together she moved house without, it seemed, the slightest disruption to her business. She is not at all dependent upon a particular sort of space for her work, deriving her structures more from her time management. Angela has talked whistfully about the super duper business units on the outskirts of the town, commenting that the overheads would for her be



prohibitive. Her work room, at the back of the house is necessarily where she does her work at the computer, but the computer and add ons are there for the use of the children too. Angela uses the other parts of the ground floor too during her working day, wandering into the kitchen for coffee and taking her television breaks in the living room. Indeed Angela seems to gravitate to the space which suits her mood, and this has for some of our chats extended to the garden - via the cake shop. Angela's thinking space also includes the woods in which she walks the dog, which I believe link up with the woods and paths that John uses for clearing his head. Indeed John talks about his location as ideal because he can just pop out for a walk to mull over problems. This is not quite so possible when work and family fill the same times and spaces. The next section discusses such constraints.

### **Family**

The interwovenness of family with self-employment activities, where a family member is self-employed, be they parent or offspring, offers advantages and constraints to all concerned. This interwovenness is not merely in terms of time and space either, but in terms of the whole family welfare, well-being and financial security. In the cases that will be discussed in this section, most of us are parents, but in some cases family refers to in-laws or partners. The section begins with Angela, whose activities are materially, spacially and temporally interwoven with those of her family.

The interwovenness of Angela's work with her tasks, activities and role as mother are visually apparent on entering her home. Although a room at the back of the house is her office, bits and pieces for work find their way onto the kitchen table and odd items belonging to the children wind up in

the office. When the children caught the electronic baby bug and bought little gadgets to nurture, (banned from their school), Angela had the task of child minding them during the day as well as doing her own work. The computer was an investment for the children as well, so they have access to all the programmes and software that Angela uses. When she bought the camcorder, she partly justified the expense on the grounds that it would be used both for her work and for family activities. She said that she wanted to be the sort of family that used a camcorder. The children have all benefitted from using the computer and it becomes popular when there are homework projects to do. Beyond this though, Angela does what she can, if not to encourage then at least to enable creativity in her children, and the tools of her work support this very well.

Angela likes to do things well and feeding the family is high on the list of things to be done well. Friday night is fish and chip night, but the rest of the time the meals are homecooked and well cooked. So she stops work when it's 'schooltime' (a word with a taken for granted meaning which for those of us with children means 'thats the end of whatever was on our agenda for the day, its now time to give over our attention to our offspring, listen to what they've done all day, cook for them, feed them, dish out tea and sympathy, ferry them to their respective clubs, sports, friends, help with and then check the homework and bath and bed them'). So Angela stops whatever she's doing at 3.30pm and does the parenting, resuming work after lights out. She gets a bonus on Youth Club night, out they go and she may snatch a few extra hours of work. She says it's sometimes possible to work with them in the house, but not to get into her work in any depth. Discussing work overlapping with family time Angela indignantly related the incident in which her Sunday was taken over with work on the 'big project', which included having a colleague in the house, another one

on the telephone and her daughter desperately wanting help with her craft project. I asked her if she'd been able to drop everything and focus on the work: *"Well no, because it's Sunday so I've had to cook Sunday dinner and the kids were here all day which meant there were lots of interruptions, I'd started to look at it but I couldn't actually do the deep concentration bits ..."*

This frustration at not really being able to get down to work is amplified in the school holidays. During the long summer break from school Angela became quite fed up. She didn't attribute this to the children particularly: *"The kids aren't really a great problem, it's just me ... I mean, I'm fed up with living here, fed up with the North East, I'm fed up with struggling ... I can't seem to cope with any of it ... I think this is more me than work, but then if the work was going swimmingly er ..."* It seems that for Angela all these time, space and family issues are intertwined, and this was apparent earlier when we talked about money. Angela assesses her wealth with a stocktake of her fridge.

So too she looks at the development of the business in terms of the financial security of the family, and is reluctant to risk it: *"I mean part of this marketing thing is all tied up with the, if it all goes horribly wrong I want to be able to go back on income support, and you don't want to look as if you've ever been successful it's all tied up with that. There's no safety net ... if I ever have to go back on benefit or even my current relationship with benefit, there isn't a no man's land ... I mean I suppose we do eat slightly better now. But then I don't see that as an extravagance, I see that as a necessity ... I haven't got anyone to say 'there Angela you tried', I haven't got anyone to support me through the lean times by saying 'there there Angela here's £100 go and buy the kids some food and let it tide you over*

*till you get some money in'. And living in an economic climate which is becoming more and more stifling in so much as the kids want more, they want big things, their friends have big things I mean big in terms of expensive, so you have that pull. And on the other hand you have that the benefit system's become so complex and so mealy-mouthed that you can't really rely on that anymore to be there as a safety net ... you know I have this fear, its almost a nightmare, I may never be able to go on benefit again, ... it might be shit but once you're there you can eat ... but when you're robbing Peter to pay Paul you start wondering which is the priority here, do I take the kids out this week or do I spend £100 on business cards?"*

The priorities with which Fiona and her partner made decisions about who would work were also based upon income and the welfare of the family as a whole. If dates or times of work clashed, the development of Fiona's business as a priority was peripheralised in favour of the greater income her partner could bring in. The bottom line was the reduction of risk and what was best for the family coffers. But although in this respect Fiona's work was not deemed so important, the very fact that she was self-employed affected such things as house insurance, car insurance and even the health insurance for her daughter's school trip abroad.

She feels that the family don't attribute much importance to her work, and yet when I asked her about family support she was quick to point out that her partner makes the stands that display the work and her children accompany her to craft fairs and sit on the stall. She explained that what would be work for her could be turned into an outing for the children. Edward had the same way of doubling up on occasions, although his report was rather guiltily delivered: *"I'm a keen walker, sometimes my wife*

*gets fed up because I turn everything into a book, for example our holiday in Rhodes."* But he also said that the family didn't really take his work seriously until he started making money at it, and this he felt was because he was there at home all day.

Some were more forthcoming than others about the ways in which self-employment and family life were intertwined, Anthony for example was keen to justify the switch to self-employment as a good career move, and readily promoted this way of working as a benefit to the family as a whole particularly in terms of sharing childcare. This was seen as a financial saving to the family and much more convenient than finding suitable care elsewhere. But Freda, despite having the Little One under her feet took some time to start discussing her work as positively intertwined with the family. At the outset Freda was almost apologetic about having to spend time with the children.

There were no 'real' reasons for going self-employed at the exclusion of all others, but clearly the way of working for many fitted in well with obligations to family, partners or children, and it was just a question of time before this emerged. Rose said: *"It's something to do while the children need me"*, and Patricia that it was work which was easy to put down if her husband needed her. Hilary was rather like Briony, entering the arena of self-employment more or less as a result of starting a family, and expressed constant surprise at her business successes. She happily admitted that she was entirely hopeless with money, and hadn't a clue how to cost out her work. She had made probably a massive loss on her earliest, even quite prestigious work: *"I thought I'd put in a low price just to get it but my mother said well work out how long it's going to take you ... so now, knowing what I can achieve in a week, that's crucial!"*

It seemed to me too that although there was sometimes a struggle on the part of a lot of these people to have their family take their work seriously, they would welcome advice and input from family members from time to time. Despite their contact with different support agencies, both Freda and Sonya, like Hilary, sought advice and support from their mothers or mother-in-laws over different business issues. Sonya felt comfortable working from home as her mother had done, and had relied on the contacts her mother had made to start her off with a few jobs. Briony's commissions had mainly come through family and friends, they were a valuable support therefore both financially and through displaying her work. Sally depended upon her mother-in-law to help out with catering and taking care of transport and such. Freda also depended on her mother-in-law to drop off repairs when necessary on her way to work, and collect bits and pieces for her from the town. They had a trade off in that Freda would do some of her report typing for her. I met Freda's mother in her workshop on a few occasions, tidying up the place and keeping an eye on the Little One. Problem solving discussions would take place there or on the telephone. I asked Freda who she had talked to about a particular business problem she was mulling over: *"Well just Martin and I and the mothers, they often get a call, have to think about ... well my Mum's a great one for saying well put down for and against on a bit of paper she always says that, sit down and write it down and then when you see it written down it often helps you to decide, which it does you know, I mean I sat down and was trying to work it out you know with the pros see of the situation, and I still don't know!"*

The pros and cons are complex, particularly as decisions concerned with business are interwoven with other lifestyle decisions. Briony explained

the difficulties of long term planning, entertaining her daughter at the same time as talking with me. Redundancy coincided with pregnancy, so self-employment was an ideal way of bringing in some extra income. When I asked her about how she saw the business going in the future her response was in terms of family life: *"I don't know, everything's quite short term at the moment, I'm at the end of my enterprise allowance, completing my first year and seeing how it went, I can see as far as July and then perhaps some teaching in September, but none of this is set and if we have another baby I don't know if I'll be able to do that. At the moment I can see my work increasing as I'm getting known, at the moment it would be hard to go back into employment, but I don't know about longer term ..."*

### **Other distractions**

Equally distracting are those activities that we find or find us and which jump into the times that we might otherwise be working in. I'll start by considering myself a distraction to those I've been researching. I am most sensitive to this when I am starting and finishing interviews or visits and thanking people for their time. But I do suspect that on many occasions I have valued respondent's time as work time more than they have themselves. Patricia seemed to treat my visits as a business meeting, non-remunerative but none the less valuable. She prepared for them and treated the meeting as an opportunity to reflect on what she'd been doing and the progress she'd been making. Meetings were scheduled with start times although finishing times were unspecified. We'd sit at the table and out would come the notes she'd prepared. If the telephone rang she didn't move a muscle, either the answerphone would intercept the call or her husband would take a message.

The actors knew that I was 'someone from the university'. Some mistook me for a researcher from the Business School, and they tended to glaze over when I said: "no, the Sociology Department". But perhaps that's not a bad thing. Being from the university did seem to clothe me with some status, I felt that I was being offered the special chair, or being treated as rather clever in a way, but probably someone who wouldn't have a clue about business. Freda's workshop has a little window in the gable and a dusty window ledge. With only two chairs and a stool at that end to sit on, I naturally gravitate to the window. The first time I did this poor Freda became flustered, *"it's not very clean"* she said as she reached a mucky hand out to swipe the dust off. I am a distraction for being an unusual visitor, and also for being even the slightest bit interested in Freda. And I wonder what they'd be doing if I wasn't there, and if sometimes I take the place of other distractions. I've gradually let slip to most of them that I used to be self-employed too. Their shoulders drop a little as they relax, and then suddenly I'm an asset as the free business adviser, marketing director or financial services agent.

In the early visits the conversations were reasonably brief, around an hour and a half, say. The odd interruption would it seemed, provide evidence that these actors were indeed self-employed. Sitting with Anthony the telephone rang, causing him to become doubly distracted, doubly busy, distracted from his work by me and distracted away from this distraction by the telephone. Our conversation had been quiet and relaxed, after all we'd agreed to meet at a time when he felt that he could 'fit me in'. There was evidence of work in progress on the desk, piles of paper, the microscope and the radio, but as the call ended his expression said: *"what a relief, see how busy I am, that was one of my clients, now where were we?"* Below a door opened, the children called goodbye; he would have



been looking after them this afternoon but for this interview, so instead his wife was taking them with her.

Barry keeps his work hidden under the stairs. As I write this, bearing in mind the tools of his trade, ropes, sports equipment, harnesses, it occurs to me that it might not be just that he's a tidy person, perhaps he's concerned that visitors stumbling upon these items might misunderstand his trade. It's not this really, he's proud that he doesn't need an office, even his filing trays fit in the cupboard and after all it is his girlfriend's house and not very large. So when we meet and I sit down, in the chair that the journalist used who interviewed him last week, I have no sense at all of having distracted Barry from his day's work. He moves so slowly and deliberately, speaks very quietly, and I must seem to be in a tearing hurry by comparison. The tea brews slowly, the plants grow on the windowsill as we talk, no interruptions, no phonecalls, where *is* the telephone? He's not working today. He's just getting some new printing done, about to do a sales drive. What do I think of the posters, and the name change. It's been quite a year for him, pretty successful so he's spending some time reflecting on the next move to make. He's a bit bored, it's a quiet time of year, so I'm merely a scheduled interruption to a mulling over sort of day, a saunterly sort of day.

It's a bit different with Jenny, but then the wall to wall neatly labelled box files shout 'busy' at me as I enter the room. Two chairs for visitors, set on a rug and facing Jenny's office chair, no cat, files, books or dust to be removed from either of them so I may choose one and sit down. The office cum meeting room might have been prepared for my arrival, but I suspect is in a constant state of readiness. So has Jenny made the 'hold my calls' call before I arrive? She's relaxed, she gives me time, undivided attention,

she wants this chat, she wants to talk about her business, reflect on progress. She too is at a watershed, just about to do some marketing, seek some new work. But she's not going to rush, it's nice to mull it over and besides she's a bit worried about it, marketing is not her favourite task. I'm an avoidance tactic, she's at a crossroads and quite happy to wait there for a while.

So is Sarah. It is also a quiet time for her this week, no fairs to go to just a few bits and pieces to finish off upstairs. She's not in a rush. She's a bit bemused by it all, self effacing, it's nice to have me there but she's really not sure that I'm not wasting my time with her, she doesn't think what she does is that special, she's just quite surprised that she has found a talent for something for which there is a market. She's taking things cautiously, but she doesn't need to mull things over yet, she has identified the quiet time of the year and will wait and make plans then. I feel I am a distraction here, but it's more that I have invaded her home rather than interrupted her time.

If I run to keep up then it's OK to talk with Craig. He's into being busy, dynamic, never bored and always rushing all over the place. We can meet between two calls he has to make, and so we find an empty seminar room. He's coming past anyway, and that's that. He works out of the boot of his car, so there's really no point in my trying to catch him at home. Craig loves the chat, the questions I ask him are pounced upon, and if he feels he's not quite sorted out what he wants to say in response then he asks if we can come back to it. We spend hours putting the world to rights, the trouble with this is this and the trouble with that is that ... At the end he asks me to remind him about the things he's not responded to and we go over them. Then he's off, but not before inviting me to the Business

Club so that we can continue our chat. For some months afterwards I get regular bulletins through the post about the state of local businesses and Craig's in particular.

Freda's days seem to be a constant round of distractions, so I try to fit in with whatever she's doing. I muck in beside her and we chat as we work. Freda's a comfortable person to work with, and although my skills are limited in the leatherwork department, I'm able to at least produce something over the course of a day rather than merely get in her way. If my work there involves sorting things out for her, tidying up and bringing a bit of order to the hell hole under the bench, then it facilitates her work. So if the conversation is distracting then at least there's a payoff for her. The work I help with would be classified as skilled manual labour, so once the design is sorted out and measurements and cutting done, it's not too difficult to chat and work at the same time. This wasn't quite the way it worked for the first few visits, as we sat with microphone between us and I had Freda's and sometimes Martin's undivided attention. But more often it's the phonecalls from advertisers trying to sell her advertisements that take up her time and distract her completely from her work, or the stable hands coming in for a coffee and a chat.

The running into each other of working day and these odd distractions is very much the norm for Freda, so my presence is just another thing to be accommodated, fed tea and biscuits and chatted to. And the stable hands are her friends, and so wrapped up in and connected with Freda's life there. Freda, as parent with friends who are parents, has stepped in and helped out when childcare has been necessary. This helping out in a crisis sort of distraction has eaten into her working day and on the odd occasion given rise to angry incidents, such as the occasion on which

Freda's client arrived before she did, impatient for her work to be finished and returned to her. Freda, running late and with an extra child in tow arrived at her workshop to find me and a very angry flustered client waiting at the top of the steps to her room. Freda had not finished the client's repair job, indeed had been certain that the job was not due to be collected until the following day. She duly did the repair, whilst the client waited, but the angry words and client's temper produced an unfortunate result. That was to be the last job she would receive from that particular client and the whole incident upset Freda for some time to come.

But the tea and sympathy so regularly given out by Freda as part of the interesting punctuations to her day was reciprocated: Freda suffered from the angry client incident, feeling her confidence shaken and worrying about her status and reputation. It put her off her stride, unsettled her, and remained the opening topic of conversation for some time afterwards. Her other clients and customers and friends however seemed to go out of their way to call in to see her, bring her work and show their support and confidence in her. Freda was given opportunities to check out her status and reputation, question those who knew her and the client she'd fallen out with. She was distracted but used these other distractions, interruptions to settle herself. She could play over the event: "*... did I do the right thing, what would you have done ...? Would you ...? Is she really like that, is she always, so it wasn't just me then ... She's taking her work elsewhere you know, will others do the same do you think?*"

Freda's friends carried her through this episode, they might be distractions to her work but nevertheless play an important part in keeping Freda running as a business, and after all they need her, value her proximity, her skills, her prompt and efficient turn around of repairs for

them, and the warm haven for coffee after the mucking out. In the end the pay off was too much though, as Freda decided to move away from this to the isolation of her barn.

Angela grumbles about interruptions and not being able to get things done: *"... and all the sort of phonecalls, I don't know how I manage. Because, if you're out at work, working for somebody else and you get a personal phonecall it's almost a subversion, so it's great, but if you're working from home and you're working for yourself it's just a bloody interruption. And you can't again you can't say to people I'm sorry the boss is breathing down my neck I've got to get this job finished, you can't say that when you're at home ..."* But Angela is as happy as Freda to use a conversation on the telephone with a friend to cheer herself up, settle herself down, or to punctuate domestic and work tasks.

I was concerned that I distracted Angela a great deal from her work, from the task of focussing on the development of her business and the practical tasks that that involves, interacting with others in the business domain, and making contacts, and marketing. I felt that Angela both used the days I was with her as an excuse not to confront difficult business related tasks such as these, and at the same time used me as a sounding board which perhaps enabled her progress in some ways. She certainly came to note that she had gone through a phase of being very easily distracted by alternative activities in the home. She recognised that where once she'd stop and watch a television programme to punctuate her activities, to take a break, this habit had extended into watching the next programme and the next. But my visits, as distractions, had allowed her the opportunity to reflect upon this phase and move on. I think what has become noteworthy here is how my visits became embedded into actors

day-to-day activities and into my own day-to-day working. So this section that began with my distracting role as researcher has revealed the enmeshed selves and lives of all of us as inter-actors.

### **Summary**

I began this chapter by taking a look at time and space, which I consider to be the broad frames within which we live and work. It was not difficult to establish that there are struggles within these frames as other obligations pull us away from work activities. In their becoming self-employed, in going through the processes of making a business and setting up ways of doing it, there are tugs and pulls from those others with whom we interact. The tugs and pulls are able to key frames so that, for example, Freda's workshop became a meeting place for the stable hands and Angela's work time became a time to watch daytime television or keep the children's toys ticking. The socially constructed frames had benefits and drawbacks; social support maintained one's well being - as I discovered to my cost by working too long at home alone, but there were drawbacks as Freda found it just impossible to get all her day's work done at the workshop. In the next chapter we reflect upon the progress of the self-employed actors in this study, and see if in their struggle to stand up as self-employed they are beginning to feel embedded in yet another frame, the business community.

## **Chapter Six, Reflections**

This chapter is closely related to the last, as we look at the ways in which actors are embedded in those parts of their lives which may have very little to do with their self-employed career, yet may feel themselves to be, and I see them to be, on the peripheries of the self-employed or small business domain. As the actors in this study make their self-employment it is as if they carry their path in front of them, placing each stepping stone ahead of them one at a time. Balancing at this stage is not easy, and any falling is likely to be backwards, against the other lives with which they are embedded, and which yield known and tried and tested wisdoms for them.

It seems to me that when we decide to embark upon something new, a new way of living which is different from the way we have been living, we bring into being a new self, a new incarnation of the other selves which cumulatively make us what we believe ourselves to be. But it is not a simple process or one that will be successful entirely through our own determining. We are social and need the interactions of others to assist our development and confirm our selves to be what we are designing them to be. So as a self-employed self is developed, interactions in the business domain which confirm us as 'in business' are valuable. However if they are not forthcoming, or if they fail to confirm us as in business, then our confidence may be shaken. At the stage at which I have been sharing time with actors, they have been starting out, developing their businesses and so developing their self-employed selves. So these selves are a bit shadowy, new and young, not yet clearly defined and puffed out. The interactions in the business domain are few and far between for some of them, so the business self may almost fade away between interactions.

I'm not sure it is right to describe their position in relation to an Enterprise Culture or Small Business Domain as peripheral, as this implies that there is some very palpable domain with which they have a liminal relationship. In chapter one I introduced the idea of an Enterprise Culture and Small Business Domain through a look at the academic literature and how the literature treats it. I tend to see this domain, the world of small business, as far more like a series of networks between clients and customers, suppliers and producers, advisers and so on. And each of these networks begins with perhaps the smallest of interactions. This crocheted quilt of networks must look to the newly self-employed rather like a strange city to a tourist, but, for the self-employed person there is no map. Certainly some of the actors in this study talk as if they are outsiders with no map, not sure if they should just pick a street and see where it leads, or stand back to try to get a better overview before plunging in. They fall back upon the knowledge that is familiar to them, and retreat into the selves that are better developed and in which they have confidence, fall back on the interactions with family and friends which do not challenge their new self. In their becoming stages of self-employment, they are tempted to stay in the cities for which they don't need maps, the places in which they are not peripheral but embedded, the frames which they know like the back of their hands.

In this final data chapter, the processes of becoming self-employed which are discussed are to do with the rather shy, nervous interactions of the self-employed actor in their self-employed role. It is less about preparatory and constructive processes, and more about the tentative feeling of one's way in the strange world of business. It is about the newness of doing self-employment and the scariness of it all. The actors'



voices are more reflective here, as we discuss isolation, and networking, their interactions and their confidence.

### Isolation

Many of the self-employed people I have spoken to have talked about feeling alone, having no-one to talk to, or seeing no-one for their whole working day. They have felt that they are very much on their own to figure things out, whether they are things that are concerned with how they should run their business, or problems to do with practical issues. And the day-to-day interactions are missed very much, the informal odd snatched moments, conversations with others in a building for example, having someone meet or greet you at the start of the day. The social and non-work related interactions were missed very much by Craig, who loved rushing around and meeting people but regretted not being in a large department with young people around. The casual but quick and witty snippets of their conversation had, he felt, kept him younger at heart and up to date with life. Jenny had a similar complaint: *"It would be nice to find that there is a peer group, I went to one meeting of a club supposed to be for people working as self-employed or as consultants, but it was useless, there was no-one there who did anything remotely like I did and they were mainly men who were business consultants, so what was on offer was not at all appropriate. If there was some organisation of consultants I would find that really nice. That is one thing that is lacking, peer group support, colleagues, not the client or subcontractor but sideways contact. I've not looked to see if this is available on the Internet as I use that merely as an information and communication tool. But what I want is face-to-face contact, this is one reason why I'd like to get more work locally."*

Thomas wanted something in the way of work related contacts that he could mull over problems with, as he said: *"There's a lack of people working in the same area to bounce ideas off, but I have no problems with the self-employment functions."* The same was said by both Fergus "... it would be nice to have someone to bounce ideas off", and Alan: *"I miss talking to others, there's a golden rule in computer problems - you go and have a coffee, explain it to someone else and you get the answer."* Frances on the odd occasion helps another community artist out: *"Sometimes friends have too much on so we help each other out on our contracts, and in that way we learn from each other, I miss this, working alone, my ideas developing, having a peer group."*

So the feeling of having no casual, informal support with those who would be able to enhance one's way of doing business, whether by providing a supportive background or more focussed interaction, was felt to be quite debilitating, left actors feeling a little exposed, out in the cold. And they felt also that they could do with some more directed support, some opportunity to check that what they were doing was pretty much what they were supposed to be doing. As Brian put it: *"I do question whether I'm doing things the right way. That's the isolation bit. I'll have a chat with Helene, who does the same sort of things as me, about work processes."* I asked Jenny if she ever sought help and advice about her work and where from. Her response was that she did, but: *"Only informally from a friend, and to some extent with the firm of consultants I brought in for the recent contract, which I didn't feel I could do on my own, as I hadn't the credibility. Also I get it for tax affairs from a tax adviser, although I do my own accounts, he puts in my books and gives good advice about liabilities."* Thomas thought having a business mentor would be a good idea: *"So then you'd have someone who was continually taking an interest*

*in the business ..."* Fiona felt very much an outsider, she felt that in her locality people found her odd because she was an artist, but: *"on the other hand the art society I joined just to get to know other artists was full of retired people and there's a lot of rivalry. I'd like to meet people to exchange opinions but not be too intellectual about it. Just the same way as if you were a teacher you'd meet other teachers for example. We need a support group and some places sound too exclusive."* She was very clear about what would not do: *"... the National Artists Association is too big and too abstract, dealing with people making circles of stones for example, its too wierd and intellectual."*

So the support, whether more or less formal, that these actors in the early stages of self-employment require, (and this is not to imply that there comes a stage where support in the form of peers, mentors or advisors is no longer required) is something that they cannot get from the other areas of their lives from others whose lives are intertwined with theirs. And this can make being self-employed a lonely business, as Edward put it: *"It's cold working alone."*

It is quite a graphic sentiment, and one which Angela would appreciate, although perhaps disassociate herself from as well. Angela in this early stage of self-employment felt that she was on a steep learning curve with no-one she could trust to talk to about her constant acquisition of new knowledge and experience. So it fell to me to put myself at her disposal for musing over and pondering about the self-employed way of being. However, she didn't initiate meetings, perhaps the odd telephone call for some feedback, but generally she'd leave it to me to maintain the momentum of our interaction. Around the time of the big project Angela was taking lots in and having to learn as she went along, pretty quickly:

*"I'm going through such a huge learning process about business and what I'm doing, because this has been a major jump in what's expected of me and the scale of the project as well and the boundaries of what is considered to be my work are constantly moving."* She couldn't ask too many questions of the others on the project as she felt she was supposed to know the ropes, and so there was really no-one with whom she could check out her progress, or the quality of her work. And no-one to advise her about whether she was putting too much effort in in relation to the amount she'd expect to be paid, or advise her on how to handle the others on the project at times when they became difficult to co-work with. I asked her who she could turn to to mull over these things: *"My books, just my books ... I don't ever talk things through and anyway, the only people I could talk to locally are direct competition and from previous experience I don't think it a good idea to show weakness, I'm too small to show weakness."* I asked Angela what this previous experience was: *"It may be just perceived, because, as most things are, but this sort of work, in this area has been quite a cut throat industry because of the way in which funding has been handed out and the way companies have been adopted by various agencies with the ability to fund it's all been quite nepotistic and underhand. And I've watched companies try to destroy other companies or get one up on other companies in some quite nasty ways."* I wasn't sure how much was Angela's direct experience and how much was her perception of herself as peripheral to what seemed to be an entirely 'stitched up' network of business arrangements in her field of work. So I asked her if any of this had happened to her: *"Not that I know of, the only thing that I do know of is is silly little things like competing for tenders I know that you haven't got a cat in hell's chance of getting the tender in the first place because it's already a foregone conclusion and nobody at all is surprised that it goes to the person they thought it would go to anyway."*

At the time Angela was keeping a low profile as she put it. Putting out feelers for work in the area but not widely advertising herself. I asked her if what she had explained was why she kept a low profile. *"Yep, but how do you keep a low profile when you're still trying to build contacts? When I have a strong enough contact base then I can start lifting my head high enough. But until that time it suits me fine to be nobody from nowhere, that the bigger companies don't need to take any notice of ..."* Keeping a low profile, not interacting very much is something Angela does quite well and quite often. It's her bad days tactic, and may even depend upon the weather. Angela describes herself as someone who suffers from seasonal affective disorder, someone who gets depressed and lethargic during the dark winter months. Her perception of herself is not always good, and she feels sensitive to what she thinks people's perceptions of her are. This came over on a marketing course that I attended with her. Angela felt that the course leader was directing more attention towards me as academic than towards her as business person. It wasn't something that I had noticed, but it angered Angela and, speaking about this, she said that she had felt tempted to leave the day course and go home.

Retreating to home or remaining in home are frequent strategies. In the first week of the school summer holidays I visited Angela again, and asked her if she'd been doing much work: *"No not really, lots of pricing up but not any work ... not any productive income bringing in work. In a lot of ways that's my own fault because I'm not putting myself out there."* She'd described this previously as 'fear of flying' so I asked her if this was why: *"Um, reluctance to get off the safety blanket, disillusionment with the whole business ... Yes, my get up and go has got up and gone ... I've thought about it a lot and I've thought well when you're in an office and*

*you work for someone you don't have to bother if you sell or not because well you don't think about things like that they don't impact on you, at the end of the day you get a wage regardless ... you never get any of those doubts, in fact it's the opposite, because if you do well then there's someone there to praise you, because they are in a higher position than you you usually respect their praise even if you don't respect the rest of their opinions because you think well they should know. So, you don't get any of that, and, again, that regular income. So all of these things are part and parcel of it. I mean the other part and parcel of it is that I have this sort of horrible fear that I made a bad career move as a person, I mean not so much in work but in circles of friends and relationships and all sorts of other things that I feel I haven't done it right and I don't know how to do it right in this area ... I just feel I've been knocked down in a sense and the big problem has always been that I've got no capital, and I've got no credit rating, and I've got children. And yes, in some ways these are excuses, and I know that theoretically there must be a way of being able to do this thing, it's just a case of having the guts and the initiative to do it. And probably if I felt now as I felt then, I would be doing it but I just feel so knocked back and hit down and is it worth the bother?"*

Freda doesn't despair quite so much, but feeling her way forward in the early years, and setting up routines with which she is comfortable, is isolating for her too. *"Well I have days when I just plod through it and everything's fine and then I have days when I get so mad I think God I've got to do something about this and then I start doing something and some work comes in and I have to stop. You just, I mean maybe you've got a bit behind with the work although instead of picking it up and doing it a few days late you think how am I going to get it all done and what will people think of me, but then they don't really know that you're panicking over it,*

*when you've got it done it all fits into place ..."* It's hard for her to have some sense of how other people see her.

On a business course, the only one Freda has attended, she gained some feedback and insight into the way in which others felt about their businesses. *"... it was basically about women and self-employment, and how they have to compete with men, and um, just, well, then they had little talks about marketing and whatever, and self assertiveness, I did the marketing one, I was going to do the self assertiveness one but I don't know, but the woman said, oh no, the woman that's doing it might put you off anyway, so I thought fine, but I felt, well you know when you have days when you feel nobody's going to listen to me and you're not capable of doing anything, well, it was one of those days when I rang up and wanted the self assertiveness course so it would have been a waste of time anyway really, so I did the marketing, but yes it was, there was different people who talked about how they had progressed, how they'd been working in an office and didn't like it and gone on to something else and didn't like that and then whatever they were good at it threw them into self-employment and it was quite good because they've started off, you know, like me. I mean, I started off working in the bank and I went through jobs and there was one girl who was like posh looking and smart and she'd started off she'd gone through about five or six jobs and you think maybe that it's not just you, they said that they have their busy periods and then it goes slack and they think Oh God I've got to get a job well I mean I've been through all that, you get to a stage when you think what am I doing all this for, there's no work coming in ... and then I've thought no, I don't like being told what to do and I've got this far with it so I just don't want to give it up and well ... I definitely feel that I've gone too far to give it up, and well, I wouldn't give it up totally anyway because I enjoy doing it and so I*

*think, well, if I'm still going to want to do it then why give it up? Because I'd still want to do the stitching and that, so I might as well carry it on, and you can't just do it out of a back room because there's too much stuff."* I wondered when Freda had felt she'd got to this point of no return.

Freda: *"Well I think after we'd got in here, when we'd actually got proper premises and you're getting loads of customers in, that you've not seen before, and they've obviously found out about you, somehow, and, I don't know, I think that awkward lady had a lot to do with it as well, because of the support I got from everybody else, she'd sort of upset me and I thought ooh, I can't be bothered with all this and then you know they were all giving us quite a bit of support and all that and then I sort of realised how many people were around."*

Jill: "And you didn't realise that before?"

Freda: *"No, not really all the time, because it's just them, and you're not here all the time and you don't realise ooh they're thinking of me because they're not trying to get you all the time, and when I'm working from home, I mean I take work home and do it, but although I'm doing work I feel as if I'm not, and I feel guilty for not being here, when I should be here and open for set hours ... at the moment I just feel a bit in between it's like I'm trying to get sorted ..."* I asked Freda if she had meant that she wasn't sure what people thought of her as a business person *"Well yes, yes sort of, well 'you can't get hold of her, is she really a saddler?'"*

Freda depends heavily on the network, small as it is, of friends and clients that come in and out of the workshop. This was no more apparent than when she needed, almost insatiably, their supportive comments about the difficult client incident. Caught out on many occasions by advertisement sales people telephoning her, she leapt at the chance to use me as consultant/partner to avoid being forced into a quick decision on the



telephone. Freda readily used me to mull over decisions and get a second opinion or feedback about a business dilemma. She was never very sure about her role as self-employed, checking with me that it was alright to come in at ten, or go into the town to do the shopping in the middle of the day, or charge a certain amount for a repair.

Alan used me consistently as a sounding board too. He was quite literally alone for many hours of his working day due to a lack of clients. Alan's way of life has become increasingly isolated since I have been researching and meeting with him. His days start early and alone, and he still cycles to work rather than catch a bus. He cannot afford a car. Whereas once he would turn up at Business Club meetings now he cannot afford the trip to their location. He feels set apart from the staff in the hairdressers at the front of his workroom, so sits alone away from them reading or, now, composing poems. Acutely self conscious, reflecting on every interaction with clients, Alan feels that his interactions are sometimes awkward and that he is too 'intense'. Suggesting that he should maintain a social life he responds that he simply cannot afford to. When Alan needs to mull something over or feels he should check out a business idea he will telephone me for some response. Despite suggesting on many occasions that he might try contacting the local enterprise agency for appropriate advice there always seems to be some reason why Alan will not do this. I asked him on one of the early visits when he had last been in contact with them; his response was that he'd not been for six or seven months.

### **Support Agencies**

I found a great deal of reluctance from actors to use their links with support agencies. Even those who were still receiving financial support

from them were reluctant to make contact about the day-to-day problems they faced. They all had quite distinct perceptions about the support agencies available to them. Many felt that the free advice on offer was not worth having and that paid for advice would be too expensive. The perceptions about the sort of advice available for free varied. Angela felt that the advice likely to be or indeed given to her was directed in some sense past her at some audience of which she was not a part. She felt her work to be either too difficult to describe for them to be able to help her, or the scale and scope she aimed at to be too broad or not large enough: *"Because I wanted to be so versatile ... it's still hard to define, in some ways it's still being defined, because I'm still learning where the boundaries are of what I'm prepared to do, and the boundaries of my capabilities",* and said: *"I came away from the people who give advice on these things thinking if I was a very small company like a carpenter or electrician who just wanted to set up on their own, or if I was a very large company needing a factory immediately to employ fifty people, I would be laughing, but there was nothing for anybody in-between. I mean this may have been due to the fact that there was nobody in between on the course I was on ..."*

Many had the perception that what support agencies offered was not for them, in that what they wanted to do or what their particular problems were would not be dealt with in sufficiently focused and detailed a manner. Sonya stated that unfortunately for her the enterprise agency thought she was a 'high flyer'. She felt that she couldn't and indeed didn't want to live up to their expectations, and that they were not giving her the advice she wanted that was appropriate for the level and speed that she wished to go at. Fiona, using a financial adviser to sort out her tax was horrified *"... he seemed to think that I was on the fiddle!"* It was for many

of the actors the case that the agencies might be alright for everyone else, but that as far as they were concerned they wouldn't phone up themselves with problems, or visit them for advice. It seemed to me that the perceptions the actors had of themselves, and the perceptions they had of support agencies, gave them a sense that they wouldn't or didn't fit with support agencies ideas of what self-employment should be like.

Banks were not seen as support agencies and not used for advice by many of the actors in these early stages of their business. Those that did talk with their bank managers had mixed experiences. Freda was disappointed that when she and Martin visited the bank her work wasn't taken seriously she felt. Going through a bad patch at the time had prompted their visit. Their bank manager had advised them to look at Martin's bits and pieces of building work as their main business and develop that, even at the expense of the saddlery. They both decided however not to do this. Freda's attitude to this was indignation, the manager she felt had shown no understanding at all of the investment in terms of time and training, developing trade and so on, that she had put into the business. She felt she had done far too much to coldly let it all go. Angela's comment was *"I mean I have quite a nice bank manager, but I can imagine when he retires and they get a new one in it might not be so easy because they will only ever have read the book and learned to regurgitate it and if you're only applying it to what they know, how can what you're doing make sense to them?"* She continued: *"I had one crisis just before Christmas which he resolved for me, instead of saying you're in deep shit he said OK you can do this, this or this and he went through the implications of each choice and we decided on an action together, proceeded with it and it worked!"*

Sometimes the support that was needed was technical. In Patricia's case technical support was invaluable to her. The advice she received from printers about preparation of manuscripts, proof reading, bindings, different weights of papers and different inks helped her, indeed empowered her, in future decision making. This advice to her was also informal, unsolicited and saved her money. However, most actors felt that should technical advice be needed, it would have to be paid for. Angela fortunately felt less peripheralised in this sense as she knew people who could provide her with the occasional technical advice for 'pocket money' as they were people with regular incomes. This brings us to the topic of 'networking' discussed in the next section.

### **Networking**

Networking is not an accidental or incidental activity. It is conscious and directed. I find it useful to think of these actors as they form their businesses as carrying the stepping stones they will use under their arms and laying them down in front of their feet one at a time as and when they need to take a step forward. I feel that as we talk about a small business domain, we are talking about an abstract imagined network of interactions, as muddled as a heap of spaghetti and as inaccessible unless we can just find an end to get started. Inaccessible perhaps because the threads of connections are already woven, the paving stones already laid, but by others. Standing outside of and away from the network it appears as a muddle, getting from where we stand and into it involves a conscious effort, paths will not unravel themselves and unfold towards our feet perhaps. Rather we build our connections ourselves.

I thought I'd take a look first at Freda's networking practices, as she seems less isolated than some of the others. There are three things that

Freda has wanted to do to improve her business, and she has talked about doing them since I first visited her. The first is to develop the designs she has for special and custom made fancy decorative leatherwork for domestic pets. She wants to market this to a specialist market in the US, as she feels there wouldn't be a market locally, or indeed big enough in the UK. The steps Freda feels she needs to take to develop this idea involve preparing some drawings or designs of the leatherwork and setting up a web page to advertise the work. The second thing that Freda wishes to do is to develop an outlet in the local town to take in repairs for her. There is an appropriate shop, selling a complimentary range of items and equestrian goods. The shop apparently already takes in repairs, but uses the services of another saddler some distance away. Thirdly, another self-employed person reasonably near to Freda's location is developing a manufacturing business, and needs someone to make up specialist leather goods to their design. They have approached Freda already by telephone.

During the course of time spent researching Freda's way of being self-employed the first idea of Freda's was left undeveloped. Freda felt that she had not enough time to explore the market further or take the plunge and advertise on the Internet. The costs were high and Freda felt that more exploration was necessary first, but simply didn't have time to do it. The second thing, the shop outlet, was just beginning to take off as field research was drawing to a close. The driving force behind this, however, was not Freda's but one of her clients. The client, also a stable hand in the yard below, did some part time work at the shop in the town. She had suggested to the proprietor of the shop that Freda might be a more convenient contact for repairs, and that she herself, spending time both there and at the stables, would be a willing go between, to set up contact

and when possible to take repairs to and fro. Interestingly had the client been making a charge for this to either Freda, the shop or both, we might perceive her as being entrepreneurial in the literal sense of the word. Freda had also made little effort herself to develop a work outlet with the leather goods designer, returning a call but not making the next move. She felt that she might go out to meet them and see what sorts of things they wanted from her in terms of making up to designs, but was going to wait to see if they got in touch again before getting excited about it.

Angela's networking was pretty incidental too, and she recognised it as such. *"I'm getting the right people around me, in the right way, at base level, not just assuming their confidence, I'm building it before I'll even think about using it."*

Jill: "How?"

Angela: *"Just by being there you know, interacting with them as friends as opposed to acquaintances. You know a lot of people start off, they start off they take an acquaintance and it immediately becomes a business association, but I seem to be doing it a slightly more subtle way, by building the friendship ... for me it's a secure base, it's a base within which I can fail openly which is quite good..."*

She resisted going out and putting herself on the line with lots of reasons for this. For example she feared too much exposure early on for fear that competitors might take advantage of her weaknesses and put her out of business. As quoted above: *"I've watched companies destroy other companies or get one up on other people in some quite nasty ways ... the only people I could talk to locally are direct competition, and from previous experience I don't think it's a good idea to show weakness, I'm too small to show weakness"*. By 'weakness' Angela meant showing what she was not

capable of, showing to the competition the types of work she was not set up to do. This reluctance to network presents her with a dilemma: *" But how do you keep a low profile when you're still trying to build up contacts? When I have a strong enough contact base then I can start lifting my head high enough, but until that point in time it suits me fine to be nobody from nowhere, that the bigger companies don't need to take any notice of ... my target was always SMEs [Small to Medium sized Enterprises], with the emphasis on S, to build my reputation, and build confidence, self confidence ... "*

I asked Angela how she went about making contacts. She talked about a proposal for some work that she'd been drafting for a particular contact, and which she felt she could then take to other potential clients. As her work is quite varied she finds it difficult to put a name to what she does.

Angela: *"I don't, I just tell them what I do ..."*

Jill: "How?"

Angela: *"It depends, it's part and parcel of my, 'this is who I am, what I have done, what I'm doing now and what I could do for you' ... I guess initially it's the 'phonecall and I find out who is the best person to speak to, then I give them a brief description of what it is I want to offer them and then I might call in with a sheet of paper so that they can ask me things there and then ... It pays to get your face known, and if nothing else I'm easily recognisable, it makes an impact and I use it!"* She used the local business courses in the same way, indeed the course on time management that we attended together was most useful for Angela in that she could build contacts. She spoke of earlier courses at which she'd done the same, and noted that she still kept in touch with one of the small business people that had been there.

But it's not always like this. During a low period Angela said herself that her lack of work was due to her not 'putting herself out there'. As she put it:

Angela: *"Um, reluctance to get off the safety blanket, disillusionment with the whole business..."*

Jill: "So you're not proactively marketing?"

Angela: *"No, and that's a hurdle I will have to jump, its like standing at the deep end of a pool and wondering whether to jump in or not, and knowing that once I jump in there are no water wings ... In a perfect world I would go out next week and get myself some rather super duper business cards and hand them out willy nilly, well not so willy nilly obviously, you have to make choices, but be free with them, anyway I hate talking about this because I don't think about this in this way until I start talking about it, but to hand out the business cards I mean, in some respects I've handed out my phone number to people so it's just building on that really, taking it a stage further in terms of presentation, and then ..."*

Angela considered taking a more advanced business course, as she put it not because she really had the slightest inclination to be better qualified but because it would place her amongst the 'right people'. *"I'd be with the kind of people that I wanted to be like which would mean I could learn from them and be making potential business contacts. I don't know if that's the only answer... It's very much a presentation thing isn't it?, you're building a person that presents to the external world, I mean there's also that added element that people treat you differently if you buy smoked salmon and a bottle of champagne from the way they would treat you if you went into Marks and Spencers and came out with a packet of crisps, not drastically differently, that's one of the nice things about Marks and Spencers and I mean even the little things like that are quite useful in what*



*kind of person I am. Oh I'm the kind of person that people are cheerful and polite to ... life's a performance isn't it?, I mean it's very much let's prepare the character beforehand ... "*, and as we've reflected together on Angela's way of being in business, the preparation for going out there has featured much more than actually getting out there, as she recognises quite clearly herself:

*Angela: "I suppose I felt geographically trapped, I felt socially trapped, and I felt that opportunities weren't coming to me and because of the social thing I wasn't necessarily going to the opportunities."*

Jill: "What do you mean by this social thing?"

*Angela: "Well, I mean, not thinking myself out of the house and, I mean, it's all tied up with thinking I'll apply to do a business course, it, that, was thinking myself out ... I don't know, it's more of a mental thing, I've got to think my way out of here ..."*

There are three separate issues involved in discussing Alan's networking. Firstly, he is bound into the networks of the hairdresser who is his landlord, secondly, he is aware that he has to get out and talk to other business people about what he does but this is made difficult as he feels he cannot afford the expense of socialising even if it might increase his business. Thirdly, he vividly imagines how others will be doing a sort of networking and advertising for him, describing to me scenarios about this.

For Alan I suspect networking to be a bit of a preoccupation rather than an occupation. I worry that he has thought himself out of his treatment room without doing so in practice. Alan has attached himself to the network of contacts of another, the hairdresser who owns the salon. He is confident that those coming into the salon for a cut and blowdry will take away with them the message that he is there, and be ambassadors for his

work. "Cos I think it's er, it's where a lot of people gather and they come here and they like to talk as much as the talking aspect is as much a part of it as what the hairdressing side of it is and therefore that spreads the net, if they talk a lot as I haven't got, I never get sufficient trade ..." Yet even his clients have queried his alliance. Perhaps he is not quite on the right network. Alan cannot be accused of not trying to market his work, as the countless thousands of leaflets delivered by him, by hand, at the crack of dawn testify. He cannot, he says, afford to go out and socialise, "... socially I haven't been going out much and that's probably been a major mistake, you, cos you're not necessarily going and having a few drinks but there's all different types of social aspects, you know there's cricket matches or things like this, you know, you see I've looked at the idea of waiting and hoping the phone would ring ..." Alan decided to market his services to the staff at the university nearest to him: " I rang them up to inquire about this and she thought it would be better to just go round them, [the different departments] you know, but er I decided just to post them you know. Sometimes if you go to places people are never, it'll never be the right time for people to see you, whereas if it arrives in the post that's going to be the time when they're ready to look at it rather than as I say if you're busy and I come to see you you're going to wait an hour type of thing, you're not going to just come out of there to see me you know ..."

"I've been making, you see, there's one advert that's cost us over a thousand pound a year and I haven't got a customer on that, and if I'd used that on a social level, meeting more people, cos people have gotta trust you you know, same as if you were looking for a plumber, in amongst your friends as a plumber you wouldn't scour through yellow pages you'd speak to your friend that was in your collection of friends to say what would you advise on this, now then he might sort of say this and this and

*you'd trust his opinion so that, I mean, that socially, I haven't been going out ..."*

*"I was standing outside and there was a man come, I says, I vaguely remembered he had come to us about two month ago and he says you saved my life he says, I'm telling everybody ... but it doesn't always mean they're queueing up to see you, it's getting that initial start with people ... it takes from two directions to get them to move towards us if you see what I mean, so one leaflet in an area where they've never heard of us might not bring anyone, so if two things come to them then they're more likely to come ... you know you just need someone that knows other people ... a lot of people say they know a lot of people, you haven't got to rely on that though ... and I think a lot of people will take things, people go into these types of things and get as much paper as possible, a lot of them possibly throw them away, but what might happen is when they get home they might ring somebody up and say 'Oh I've got a problem with my neck and I cannot go out tonight', and people will say 'well I've got a leaflet about somebody that does that you know', cos a lot of paper is wasted ..."*

*" I did have another who wrote a testimony out for us but I'm reading in that book that what people want to do if they look at a testimony is to relate to that person, so you have to have local people that they can relate to, but I was thinking if you've got people from all over the place they think my, he must be good ..."*

Patricia's networking isn't so much of a performance, and involves maintaining contacts already built up with writers' clubs that she joined before she gave up her full time employment. In addition she has found herself a sort of mentor, who critically reads her work. As she publishes

herself and markets only modestly, networking is not crucial to her. She may passively await orders rather than actively court them. She does adjust this performance in a sense, however, as we noted above, in that she obscures her gender in her marketing literature.

Rob, Fiona and Sonya have all tapped into some of their own existing networks to help their businesses along. Rob maintained contact with many old work colleagues in the locality when they were all made redundant. Fiona had many friends in the craft fair and folk fair world as the music and entertainment at such events has been her social life for many years. Sonya tapped into her mother's network to start curtain making, and fortunately for her, her mother worked with an estate agent, so Sonya's business cards have found their way into clients' hands at some opportune moments.

But generating new networks has proved difficult for many actors, as discussed above under a marketing heading, and a few have found that they have had to put a lot of time into courting clients who turn out not to be the financial decision makers in a company. As Anthony explained, there are two levels of people that he deals with, the one level who want him and his expertise, and the other level who pay him. The latter level is the one he has to perform to and towards whom his efforts are more consciously and thoughtfully directed.

### **Face to face interactions**

This section follows quite neatly from the last on networks. Networks take many forms, some which involve face to face interaction and some which may involve or depend upon telephone interaction. Face to face interaction was a way in which actors interacted with their clients, and for

some of them was a difficult way of interacting. Some spoke of not liking to have to think on their feet, and felt that under the pressure of interacting could not make reliable decisions and so preferred to return to their home to think things out quietly before giving clients prices for jobs, for example. This was something I tended to prefer to do as well, and I recall sometimes wishing that I was alone in a property or site to get on with my job rather than have to chat with a client. And yet the chat was just as much a part of the job as the measuring up. A few said that they felt that they must be adequately prepared before their face to face interactions with clients. Angela felt that that preparation might begin even with nice underwear as she put it, extending out to props like the mobile phone. Martin felt the same, he dreaded being asked to do something he wasn't prepared for. And Briony too, would prepare in great detail before starting a new task as a community artist.

Freda didn't always have the luxury of preparation time as clients could at any moment walk into the workshop, and call on any of her skills or knowledge without warning. She talked of getting flustered when clients came in, and indeed she did on occasions. She would blush and stumble over her words, find it difficult to add up prices, and forget what day it was. She was like a rabbit caught in the glare of headlights, with no barriers like a desk or telephone to hide behind, only relaxing once the object of the conversation, say the saddlery repair, could be focussed upon. I felt that my presence and so Freda's knowing that she was being watched didn't help matters either, and that no matter how attentive I was or appeared to be to the bridle I was stitching Freda could still feel that she was performing to more than one audience. Some of Freda's work was less challenging than other bits, and in the interactions with clients which concerned the less challenging work the conversation would drift quite

easily into generalisations about horses or children. Other conversations orientated towards difficult tasks would tend to fluster Freda a bit more, but we might expect that to be the case. These latter conversations involved Freda asking lots of questions about the job to be done, she needed lots of information before she had an opportunity to show her expertise. Freda has commented that she feels sometimes she's not taken at face value, and that new clients tend only to let her take the lead once she's said sufficient to prove to them that she knows what she's talking about.

She has also discussed her anxiety about having to go and market the luxury products she intended designing. She had thought of manufacturing a small amount of specialist products and marketing them at Harrods. *"... it's just getting there, it's just making that plunge, I mean how do you get to them and having the confidence to actually approach them and to make out you know what you're doing and you're confident, I mean we're happy, I mean, um, I'm pleased with what work I do, I'm confident with that, it's just coming across to somebody else about it that I find very difficult."*

Alan is constantly concerned about how he comes across to others, and has mentioned this in some way or another on many of the occasions we have spoken: *"... you've got to, er, you got to make sure that you're doing things right ... I mean the particular person I've told you about ... I've known her since being six year old so, I mean, I haven't got to put a real good act on you know ... But I think all the time it can be just one wrong thing you do that's in all things it can be just one wrong thing you do and people will remember you ... I think it's me, I think maybe I'm not coming across right, cos custom is not coming, something I don't realise about*

*myself, maybe talking to people ..."* Alan thinks that there will be a relationship between the types of client he gets and the sort of people he gets on with: *"... even when I've been younger I seem to have got on better with my friends' parents than what I have with them because I tend to be a lot more serious than a lot of people would be you know, so the older bracket it's going to be more how I get custom I would think you know ..."*

Barry was quite conscious too of the difficulties he had in interacting with clients: *"I've got a young face although I'm 29, in private places of work I notice a definite difference in the way people speak to me than if I looked say 35. I will have to overcome this. When people see me actually working as the same or better than them, in a professional manner, then they are happy to come back to me, and I would say that the majority of my work has been word of mouth ... definitely a wide variety of skills are needed, especially the salesperson type ..."* He found his interactions difficult with what he called business type people. *"... It comes partly from my family, as all my family are very quietly spoken. I have to try to project my voice and be aware of it and try to sound really confident about what I'm talking about."*

### **Reflecting on confidence and knowing ourselves**

The last section drifts almost seamlessly into this one which is about confidence. We have talked around confidence already, so I want to direct our attention to it here so that we are concerned with the ways in which actors have talked about it, how they are aware of having or lacking confidence, and what strategies they use to bolster it. So this section drifts into habits and familiar activities that have less to do with self-employment and more to do with familiar strategies redeployed. It is appropriate here

to think of these actors in the process of becoming self-employed as in a sort of no man's land, not yet feeling a part of the business world, and still very much embedded in their pre-existing knowledges and actions, and falling back on them or bringing them into play in this lacuna.

For example, Alan talked about being a rather serious person. He talked, as we noted above, about getting on better with older people - and getting on better with his friends parents than the friends themselves. He put this down to his more serious and reflective, if sometimes perhaps rather intense, attitude to life: *"....like some lads I knocked about with, their mother thought I was a thinker..."* He is most comfortable with older people, is getting to realise that this is something to go with rather than try to change. He knows how to talk to them, and, so far, his clients seem to be those older people.

Freda also falls back on existing knowledges, about herself and about her family. She talks of being flustered and not having sufficient confidence in herself, and gave me this example one day: *"I mean, maybe you've got a bit behind with the work although instead of picking it up and doing it a few days late you think how am I going to get it all done, and what will people think of me but then they don't really know that you're panicking over it , when you've done it it all fits into place. But I mean it's like yesterday I had a chap who was supposed to be coming any time from three o'clock to pick up the gag reins that I've just made here and I made one lot and I did them wrong, they were too thin, so I had, I did them like, the night before. I came up here in the morning to work and get some more leather to make and I took them back and I was panicking and trying to ring him and I couldn't get hold of him, I didn't have the confidence in myself to get it done. I mean timewise I should have done, get it done in the end and in*



*the end it didn't take me that long but I thought I'm not going get this done, he's going to think I'm terrible, he hasn't used me for a long time, but I did get it done and he never turned up!"* Yet when she's dealing with a customer and the conversation turns to children, family matters or horses she's completely at ease as the following incident illustrates.

One day a customer came with an assortment of bits and pieces to be repaired. She'd been saving them up it seemed until she had a load worthy of a visit to Freda. It wasn't the first time she'd had work done by Freda, and she asked in passing how Freda's daughter was. This reminded Freda of the last time she and the customer had had some dealings. On that occasion the customer had telephoned Freda in the middle of a minor crisis, involving child, small object and a trip to casualty. An amusing and relaxed conversation followed in which the 'typical trials and tribulations of motherhood' were swapped and shared with me, and a recounting of the original event followed after the customer had left. Freda was on safe ground, the sort of safe ground in which access to a research setting is also eased.

As I write this I'm reflecting upon my time as self-employed. My self-employment began prior to motherhood, and for me, a comfortable conversation was probably one about fabrics with a wholesaler. I remember being far less sure of myself in conversations at the nursery or baby clinic. I wasn't very confident of myself *as a mother*. Freda wasn't very confident of herself *as a saddler*. Briony wasn't very confident of herself *as a community artist*. Alan wasn't very confident of himself *as a remedial injuries and sports masseur*. Angela wasn't very confident of herself *as a business person*. We reflected upon her time in business at the stage at which I began to withdraw from regular contact.

Angela had applied for a job. She wasn't working on any projects.

Jill: "What are you doing businesswise?"

Angela: *"As little as possible, just the run of the mill stuff, and when the monitor went down that was it really, as far as any fine work is concerned, I can't do anything ... that was like the bottom of the tip."*

Jill: "The last time I saw you you were building yourself up."

Angela: *"That was because I needed to build the person up, and that was the underlying, you know, this person is falling apart ... I'd definitely, I'd lost my sense of direction, I'd lost my confidence, I'd lost my image of self, I mean I do that from time to time anyway and I think OK when this happens, it's time to put myself back together again I mean we spoke about I'd considered myself as not having a life because, er, the trouble to do anything and the fact that we didn't travel and get about ..."*

*"... I guess for the first time I would go into that housewife type of thing. That 'what am I allowed to do?'. It's the typical working class objection that I've always had to housewives, you know, 'why don't you do this?' 'oh well I can't', but I've known middle class housewives in the same mental situation and working class housewives that haven't been in that situation, the situation being not being able to think yourself out of the house." "Is this a female thing do you think? "I doubt it, it may be slightly different in males, I mean after all we come across men who haven't got a life but I've never discussed it with them."*

Jill: "Would you say that during the time I've been coming here you've been sort of thinking yourself over the fence?"

Angela: "Yes."

Jill: "And would you say that, sort of, businesswise, that's what your doing now?"

Angela: *"Yes I think so, and I'm a lot less inhibited."*

Jill: "In what way?"

Angela: *" The same way as I was socially I suppose, I felt geographically trapped, I felt socially trapped, and I felt that opportunities weren't coming to me ... and I mean that's all tied up with thinking I think I'll apply to do an MBA, it was thinking myself out, but I knew that wasn't, I mean, there was never any deceit that I wanted to do an MBA, I mean it would have been nice to have an MBA but no big deal .... and I know businesswise I've got to get myself out of the house and I've got to physically get myself out of the house and think big and bold and wonderful which is partly why that job was so attractive because it not only offered that social thing that I wanted but it also offered something that I could be doing in the meantime and get some pleasure out of it ... "*

Angela some time earlier had talked about returning to study by doing an MBA. There are courses within travelling distance for her, and she felt that it would allow her the opportunity to be among a local business community. We'd been talking that day about confidence, and Angela was, it seemed to me, trying to make sense of her lack of confidence in business. After all, as she put it: *" I never lacked self confidence, I mean I've always believed I could do things even if I damn well couldn't ... on a good day you know, what's the problem? ... But then you look at the other side of it, there are better than you going out there and falling flat on their faces and losing everything ... I've had no excuse bar my own complacency ..."* We turned back to the business course *"The MBA will be a bit like putting on good underwear to go out to dinner, nobody will see it but you know it's there, you know you're not wearing your grey M&S*

*utility wear, I mean, it's not a necessity but it's another tool, almost another weapon, and also something that if the circumstances arose you could whip out and use."*

But lack of confidence or discomfort in a situation that involves new ways of employing the self may be tempered through knowing oneself in other ways, or drawing on a self that is better known. And an important resource is a self that one may reliably employ. Patricia employed her manager self. *"And I know it sounds terrible but the whole of my life I was needed in my job, I think it was this, to feel that I wasn't needed any more. And I think that's why I felt that I could put my thirty or thirty five years experience to use in writing, and hopefully help some people ... because I was a manager for so many years its the management and that's what I enjoy about plays ... you've got to manage the work to get it done on time and you've got to get it to the printer on time. And it's this discipline, you've got to get it done ... And I suppose it becomes like your staff, you're moulding it and trying to get the best out of it as the manager."* Patricia felt bereft at not being in a job and her self-employment was a way of using the skills she had acquired and honed and developed over so many years before.

Sonya's self knowledge was about knowing what she wanted out of self-employment, and what she didn't want: *"Initially I felt I was putting myself at risk, if I failed then my confidence would be back to zero."* She wanted to develop her business slowly and cautiously, she'd been unwell in the past with depression and this had made the world of employment rather intimidating for her, so for her self-employment was a cautious and tentative step forward again. This, however, had not been understood by the Enterprise Agency, so Sonya thought. She wanted to hug the ground

somewhat, whereas they were wanting her to be a high flyer. Sonya has over the course of the research, however, developed at her own pace, and has got so far as standing up and speaking publicly at Business Club Meetings. She speaks clearly, her head is high, she doesn't shuffle about, she simply, and confidently, puts forward her points. She takes the playing field there to be level, and so level it is.

John, the computer software designer felt his difficulties with self-employment hinged around the lack of external structures, not only to make one work, but to make one stop working too: *"I'm lazy, my discipline is the discipline of the task, sometimes I over concentrate and I have to stop ... this compares to working with others where there are natural breaks."* So he's aware that his self discipline is not wonderful. He's also quite comfortable with his own skills and knowledge but doesn't like the surprises that can crop up when the interactions in self-employment extend to issues outside of these skills and bring him onto new ground. *"If I'm representing myself, no problem. But in a consultancy role you can get into a situation when you don't feel that your own skills are high enough and it always happens eventually, however these are usually false fears."* He's happiest knowing where the boundaries are - and where the ground is.

And Alan's concerns are that he is too intense, as he describes it: *"But I think the way my nature is people might sometimes see me in the wrong way because of my intensive nature ... probably by wanting to help people too much, people draw back because of that ..."* Alan understands this in terms of past experiences and explains what he means to me. *"I think I can read people, there's certain things that I know that I've done and I think people can read us ... sometimes if I'm trying to help people and*

*they're viewing it in a different way you see, they're analysing it, if you're too heavy on people in that way they think you're looking for something else, do you know what I mean, I mean, say if you lived a few mile away and I was, say, lent you a few books or a tape, I might come and lend you a tape. You might think that I was looking for something else, I mean, even a man can think that way as well. A long time ago I was on a bus from Durham at night and I was quite drunk, and I wasn't well and I was talking to these two lads on the bus. And when I saw them again I apologised and my mate said 'you shouldn't have done that, they'll think you're queer' I mean I was only 18 or 19 at the time like, but I've always remembered that; people read different things into what you say. And mainly I'm quite quiet, you've got to find that blend and drop off, you know, you've not got to ring people up, they've got to come to you when they want to, you know, the only thing you can do is ring them up about something else. You have to work out how you would speak to everybody and what lines of conversation you would use ... I think I have that intensive nature anyway, and it is a bit too powerful, people can see us being like a Jekyll and Hyde type person, you can, if you lose your temper, if you're very quiet, when I was younger they did ..."* So Alan constantly monitors his ways of interacting with others, perhaps too self consciously.

### **Summary**

I wanted in this section to draw attention to the fragility of the newly self-employed people in this study, and think about this in terms of their employing a new self in a domain which, although it may be perceived to pre-exist, doesn't actually exist for them until such time as they take their first steps into it. The terms enterprise, entrepreneur and small business are words they hardly use, they are words which still lack relevance. In terms of their frames of interactions the self-employed actors in this study

are stepping beyond those within which they are embedded, and constructing around themselves new ones of self-employment. These processes of construction which we discussed in chapter four, are being carried out on the outskirts of business frames, and the constructors are timid in their building. Their self-employed selves are likewise unfinished, still just sketched in, still just emerging. So it is hardly surprising that these actors fell back on selves and knowledge of themselves which was more solid for them, longer tried and tested.

I wanted to portray the world of self-employment as, at least initially, an unknown and unfamiliar frame with few guidelines and in some respects quite scary, but not insurmountably so. It is, after all, a frame of human construction, and the actors in this study are, quite naturally, constructing the frameworks closest to them first, getting used to those and then cautiously moving outwards bit by bit. As they do this they are using their favoured and familiar ways of being and doing to bolster them as they develop themselves as self-employed. And in this last data chapter we again see how almost painfully conscious they are of these processes of constructing themselves as self-employed.

## **Chapter Seven, Understanding the Becoming**

In the preceding chapters the actors largely speak for themselves as their coming into self-employment is described. In this chapter, I reflect upon and attempt to explain how they have moved themselves from their private dreams to become public actors. The process is understood in terms of the frames they start from, and the frames they work to build in the construction of their self-employed selves. It will be argued that in order to be able to do this they have to be very reflexively sensitive to their own doings and beings, as, in their emergence into self-employment, they can take nothing for granted.

This chapter begins by underlining the narrative themes with a brief assertion of the primacy of agency and constructionism for understanding the process of becoming that these self-employed actors are going through. After exploring these themes the data chapters are discussed, beginning with chapter two, then chapter five which brings forward the use of Goffman's (1975) frame analysis as a way of understanding what it is that goes on in what we call realities. Thereafter the chapters are discussed in the order in which they have been set out in the thesis.

I argue that becoming self-employed is particularly challenging as it is a becoming which takes place in relative isolation, although people need people, in a number of ways (Murphy and Kupshik, 1992). The actors become, into frames they are required to construct themselves, and in spaces and times devoid of guided doings (Goffman 1975). I promote the assertion that in such difficult becomings, the practical consciousness with which one moves through taken for granted worlds is insufficient. A discursive (or highly reflexive) consciousness (Giddens, 1991) is



necessary in order to be able to move cautiously into a new way of being in public.

### **Agency and Construction**

The thesis starts from the underlying assumption that human beings are cognitive social agents, and, generally speaking, have the constitutive capacities to put together an organisation of their lives. This both helps to make sense of ongoing social process and facilitate successful interaction in their familiar environs and contribute to its ongoing reproduction (Coser, 1979, Mead, 1967). The social actors in this study are taken to have these social skills, being able to *replicate* strategies that have proved successful to them, search for new strategies in new contexts and *mutate* to new ways of being (Runciman, 1998) when new contexts require it.

The thesis finds people in their epiphanies (Denzin, 1989); the beginning of their becoming self-employed. It describes their process of becoming. The objects of study are the range of reflexive actions and accounts utilized to achieve the self-employed self. The way in which these self-employed social actors organize themselves in relation to their physical and social environment (Coser, 1979, Mead, 1967), is the matter of the data chapters. They are recognized as being self-conscious, reflective agents, sensitized to their being in the world, and mediating their actions in accordance with the interactions of others (Mead, 1967). They are not “salesmen” and do not wish me to think of them as such. Neither, despite the obvious requirement for a reasonable degree of motivation (Smelser, 1976), do they consider themselves to be “entrepreneurs”, or again, wish me to think of them as such. In their reflective self-consciousness they are concerned to present themselves (Goffman, 1990) in a more modest light.

They are, as social actors, at pains to be seen as credible. They construct their lives for me, explaining their reasons for their actions, their histories, living "...out of the moment back into the past" (Simmel, 1971: 360). They must explain what brought them to be where I now find them "...the individual biography, in its several, successive, institutionally predefined phases, must be endowed with a meaning that makes the whole subjectively plausible" (Berger and Luckmann, 1971: 110). I do the same. Chapter two introduces the self-employed actors in this study, and myself as once self-employed. It is an act of legitimation, an explanation and justification for the thesis. It is also several layers of construction. The self-employed actors' accounts of their lives presented to me, chopped about and constructed as a chapter in a thesis (Denzin, 1989). And it is but one of many possible accounts (Casey, 1995).

But despite the assertion by these self-employed actors that they are neither salesmen nor entrepreneurs, they are, nevertheless, moving themselves into a socio-economic context (Parsons and Smelser 1956), peopled with those described as salesmen and entrepreneurs. The language of this context, new and awkward to the actors in this study, is "...either explicitly male or apparently gender neutral, which in reality reflects the actual or assumed lifestyles of men" (Allen and Truman, 1992: 165). The men and women in this thesis are just beginning to utilise the language of the business context they aspire to, with references to enterprise and market place, competition and customer. This language is assisting them in their construction of self (Mead, 1967), as business self, even if they still present themselves for me as rather softer than that, in a softer, sometimes more domestic language.

## Construction of Work

Not only do the actors in this thesis construct their self-employed selves through their accounts to me, to clients, to customers or to friends; they construct their work. In this way, becoming self-employed is very different from, for example, entering a profession. Due to the heterogenous nature of self-employment, it has never been wholly possible to represent the self-employed collectively (McHugh, 1979), as similar in terms of class, size of business, political persuasion or the nature of work done. Thus there is no useful ideal type, no precedent and no model that may be followed in the process of constructing one's self-employment.

Whereas one might be socialised into the medical profession (Hughes, 1964, 1971, Becker et al, 1968, Davis, 1968, Sinclair, 1997) for example, there simply isn't, for these self-employed actors, the density of social interaction available to *pull them into being*. Their becoming is made doubly difficult through the necessity of having to bring their immediate contexts into being, at the same time as their self-employed selves. Hughes remarks that what distinguishes an occupation is not how long it has existed, but that "... it has long had a name, a license and a mandate, a recognised place in the scheme of things"(1971: 293). It is a task, for most of the actors in this thesis to legitimize not only what they set themselves up to be, but what they set themselves up to do. They must construct their work, carving out times and spaces from, or even within, the pre-existing ready-made contexts that are also a part of the self-employed actors world. The actors in this thesis should be understood as managing their transitions (Cohen, 1996) as they tentatively emerge into the business world.

### Themes

This account of the emergence of these actors into the world of self-employment, is the primary theme of the thesis. The thesis shows that, for the actors in this study, the process of construction of a business and self-employed self, is a journey from the broad bright “anything’s possible” private dreams, to a hard, cold, fiscal, public reality. For them the process entails going further than merely thinking it might be nice, or indeed thinking it might be the only way left, to make a living, to actually announcing to the world - or at least to one’s potential client group - that one is there, with one’s skills, goods and services, in the market place. For them it is about trying to start thinking and acting like an entrepreneur, within the limits of their own understandings of what an entrepreneur thinks and acts like, they wish to *do* it without *being* it. Furthermore they will attempt this in a world which yields up, at least to begin with, only a marginal space for their business existence; liminal to the warm, social worlds of family and employment.

The second theme is that context matters, that the hopes and dreams of these self-employed actors may only become something more, if the practical, palpable, interactional steps are taken to move the respective actor towards his or her goals. Here frame analysis (Goffman, 1975) is useful for understanding the layering, ordering, overlapping and scaling of contexts, and the interactions and negotiations therein. The keyings in frames enable us to appreciate the frail and ephemeral nature of the frames, in contrast to the more rigid dramaturgical frames employed to understand becomings in more structured work contexts, such as that of becoming a doctor (Sinclair, 1997). Each step for the self-employed actors is a step in context, and same the same time out of it; actors move towards their goals within the contexts of their lives, homes, families,

cultures, addresses, particular economic circumstances, personal faculties, regional and global economic circumstances and market requirements. Each step is ordered in space and time, co-ordinated with those contexts which require attention at any given time. Importantly, in contrast to the experience of many entering employment or developing a career, the self-employed actor is required to construct their own immediate business context, and locate it in a larger world of enterprise. There are no empty shoes to be filled or vacant desks; there is no Patricia shaped gap to stand in, no Alan shaped one or Fergus shaped one. There are no predetermined rites of passage (Strauss, 1968) on the journey into self employment; it is punctuated with degrees of compromise. There are no scheduled, rule ordered, time marked status passages, (Strauss, 1968). Where one might expect the process of becoming to be normatively prescribed by a series of steps and regularized actions, this is not so in the sphere of self-employment. There is no job interview and contract of employment, no supervision or line management. There is no recording of achievements, by peers or employers. The few markers are three monthly VAT returns and overdraft agreements, and for most of the actors in this study, the end of their enterprise grants.

The chapters, particularly chapter four, are accounts of the ways in which the actors direct their thoughts and their actions towards the processes required to become self-employed; processes which require them to *do* self-employment, and *be* self-employed - employ themselves as self-employed. These processes are constructive, sometimes innovative, ways, of finding a new, or different, way of making a living. Sometimes the processes are not so very original, but are strategies borrowed from other selves in other frames. In their becomings the actors unsurprisingly use pre-existing stocks of knowledge (Schutz, 1970) and apply them to new

circumstances. Certainly their processes require a certain degree of concentration. In the process of becoming, entering into a new domain such as self employment, a degree of concentration, awareness, reflection and introspection are required over and above that generally employed in domains with which we are more familiar. A discursive consciousness is employed (Giddens, 1991) - in the absence of peers and frames to provide ontological security (Laing, 1960) - as those becoming self-employed bring themselves and their work incrementally into being.

### **Biographies in Context**

Chapter two locates the actors and myself in our spatial and temporal contexts. It does so by locating us in the North East of England, in our homes and families, and in our histories. The actors are introduced as private individuals in these contexts, revealing their hopes and dreams – their idealized scenarios about their expectations of self-employment. Whether from a macro and structural perspective of wider power contexts, or in a micro context of interactions and negotiations in time and space, interactions happen *somewhere*. As Berger and Luckmann note: “[e]mpirically, human existence takes place in a context of order, direction, stability”(1971: 69), and these contexts are at the very least, the backdrops of change. It is in *these* contexts that there *are* Patricia, Alan and Fergus shaped gaps that they fill, and they are in the process of stepping forward from them into an emptiness they will, themselves, fill.

A socio-economic micro context for the actors in this study would be too complex to yield useful explanation. The actors do not share the historical economic story that MacDonald and Coffield's (1991) runners, fallers and plodders do. The actors in this study have not collectively experienced

radical changes in their local employment sector. They are part of a continuity in liminal spaces and times, between urban place and “Springdale” place (Vidich and Bensman, 1968). In the very way in which “... different markets connect the economy with different sectors of society” (Parsons and Smelser, 1956), the actors in this study are as alike, and as diverse, as their ways of making a living.

Macro contexts utilized in explanations about becoming self-employed are that one is too old for the job market; Angela’s *“I do tend to view myself as unemployable ... I’m female and I’m old with children ...”* reflects her understanding of western employment culture. Other explanations are that one’s skills are out of date, or the industry of one’s youth has simply gone. Micro contexts utilized in explanations are marriage, children, poor health or confidence. In this thesis each actor is “... an embodied subject located in a particular and actual local historical setting. Her world presents itself to her in its full particularity - the books on her shelves, ... Her reading and writing are done in actual locations at actual times and under definite material conditions” (Smith, 1987: 108). And an account of gendered contexts which “... points to the lack of opportunity for women - in particular those who are black or from ethnic minorities - in the formal labour market which means that self-employment is the only or last possibility of earning a living”(Allen and Truman, 1992:167), adds weight to some of the micro explanations offered in this research.

Many women do work from home, (Rees 1992), as do Rose, Jenny, Sarah, Angela, Patricia and eventually Freda. Research suggests that those women who do, may be freelancing, self-employed themselves, or supporting a partner or husband’s business (Rees 1992, Baines and Wheelock 1998) and enduring more conflicting demands upon them than

men (Allen and Truman, 1992). Bradley (1989) suggests that this has always been the case, and that women have, historically, taken different work roles to men so that their work would ensure the continuance of family life. And Smith remarks on the sorts of work that women do, observing that "... they have been assigned and confined predominantly to work roles mediating the relation of the impersonal and objectified forms of action to the concrete local and particular worlds in which all of us necessarily exist" (1987: 108).

Convincing macro/structural interpretations for these observations suggested by Phizacklea and Wolkowitz (1995) are, firstly the need for women to work, not least for income, and secondly the different way in which women are treated in the workforce, in terms of earnings, status and opportunity. This is enough to provide both a push and a pull into home working or self-employment (Dale 1987), and is further linked to the family life-cycle (Adam, 1995). Indeed Fiona would have to pay most of her wage in child care and transport costs if she returned to employment. "Moreover when there is a need to co-ordinate multiple times - the times for example, of paid work, leisure, school, meals, shopping, caring and voluntary work commitments - then we begin to see that not all times are equal ..." (Adam 1995: 95), sometimes women's time has a different exchange rate to men's. Geer (1968) goes so far as to suggest that the prospect of having to take time out of one's career to have children, or at least compromise so as to work and parent, determines the career choices of women before they even enter the work place. Indeed Sonya and I both chose self-employment in anticipation of having children.

These accounts are persuasive, and are borne out by the women in this study. Nevertheless it would be unfair to suggest that women throughout



the course of their lives are doomed to making the compromises. Allen and Truman (1992) take a more agency centred approach to this suggesting that women make their own preferences to suit themselves. They take as an example, the closure of a business, remarking that we should not write off women ending their business careers as “business failures” but rather as women making choices relevant to their whole circumstances. Power to choose is as applicable to endings as beginnings. Whilst in a broad socio-economic context it is quite right to point to the conditions under which women are pushed and pulled into self-employment, it is also important to note the compromises they make to earn some sort of a living and provide care for their families. Against this backdrop and within these constraints their ways of being self-employed vary considerably, from running small businesses as successful entrepreneurs (Carter and Cannon, 1992) to odd cash in hand work (Allen and Truman, 1992, Hakim, 1988). Within these degrees of self-employment the competing and conflicting demands (Allen and Truman 1992) are often managed successfully; in ways that are being adopted by, and becoming more relevant to their male counterparts as the domestic division of labour shifts (Siltanen, 1986).

In their early stages of becoming, the actors in this thesis, although aware of their wider contexts and in some cases the constraints those contexts put upon them, are not yet pushing at the barriers. They are still fighting shy of being labeled as entrepreneurial or business minded, still in many cases happier dreaming than doing. Their interactions remain, for many of them, primarily with family and friends. They are going to be doing their work, running their businesses, trying to make a living, in a very small way for their foreseeable futures, very often from home, from the kitchen table, from the boots of their cars or from the tiniest rooms they can afford.

Some will start out from these places on bicycles, or on foot, or with small children at their feet. They will blag and bullshit eventually, but they are not ready to do that yet; the bigger contexts are still too big for them.

### **Frames**

It is useful to employ Goffman's (1975) frame analysis work to envisage the different contexts wherein the self-employed are located both in their process of becoming, and indeed where, with a small or micro business, they will remain. By "where", I mean the spatial and temporal frames within which they operate, and the social frames of "guided doings" which constitute their "realms of being" (Goffman, 1975: 574). The frame is a useful tool for understanding what is going on for individuals whose lives are not easily bounded in pre-existing social structures. Careers work has no great need of frames, as "the profession" or "the workplace", "the factory" "the hospital" "the uniform" "the teacher", "the classroom" provide both actor and academic with an indexical understanding of context (Berger and Luckmann, 1971), be it the context of an individual career, a spatial or temporal context, or one labeled, bounded and legitimised through constant usage (Hughes, 1971). These places and spaces, paths and establishments are, nevertheless, the primary frames (Goffman, 1975) through which those on career paths move. The self-employed actors in their becoming, lack such work related primary frames - until, that is, they construct them themselves. Alan paints his tiny room blue, puts up a small bookshelf which in the acres of time between clients is his only company. Outside, the chatter of the hairdressers and the wafts of cigarette smoke serve only to reinforce his solitude. The self-employed actors in this study were not leaving the house, to get through the rush hour into the city, or to get into the office before the boss. Their days were not punctuated with office banter or meetings they'd rather not attend. They are not salaried,

paid for holidays or insured for when they are sick, they are not remunerated for overtime, there is no such thing as overtime.

The “guided doings” (Goffman 1975) of frames with which one is not so familiar, may be less comfortable, daunting or even feel threatening. How does one negotiate a bank loan, or price up a job, establish the ground rules for sub-contractors, or persuade a supplier to deliver the goods with an invoice whilst persuading customers to pay up front? The guided doings of small business and entrepreneuring, are, for the self-employed actors in this thesis, still unfamiliar frames, and the guidance for doing is rather thin on the ground, from Enterprise Agencies in their localities. Emerging from familiar frames into these larger ones is something they are compelled to do, because they are all actors within economic frames, and must at some stage, and *on* some stage become economic actors (Parsons and Smelser, 1956). This is where they are now, hovering on the brink of these work frames, but holding on to the less risky ones.

In the self-employed context it's not funny but frustrating when others either refuse to acknowledge one's first and embryonic attempts at constructing a work frame – Freda's workshop becomes coffee room for the stable hands. Neither is it funny when others insist upon *keying* it back into, for example, a domestic frame or social frame – as Edward's family do by interrupting when he's trying to concentrate. Fiona transforms her dining room into a studio, but with only limited success, and it must all be changed back by teatime. Edward writes in the spare bedroom, but because he's at home all day the rest of the family assume he's available to pick them up from various activities, run errands and so forth. He's only able to achieve any success in *keying* the family home frame, when he finally starts getting commissions. Angela's computer is commandeered

by the children, the family want to use the telephone too, and the office is needed again for a spare room. Any number of keyings work at squashing their self-employment back into something not quite real or serious, something temporary, less than solid. The frame must be rebuilt daily, until such time as its presence and frequency are agreed upon by all the agents operating within and around that frame, the self-employed actor her or himself, their family and friends, and their clients and customers.

Of course there are advantages for these self-employed actors, who set up their own frames with the intention of being able to key them at the drop of a hat. Their motivations are far from solely economic (Parsons and Smelser, 1956); Patricia can indeed put down her writing to attend to her husband. The actors in this thesis are shuffling their multiple realities (Shutz, 1970) to suit their circumstances. Allen and Truman note that for women in self - employment, their business activity “ ... will only be one aspect of the total work ...” (1992: 166) they do. The multiple selves may blur usefully, although the multiple realities may present more of a challenge.

Berger and Luckmann (1971) remark that an increasingly typical phenomenon of industrial society is that of different, and often - pathologically they say - discrepant worlds. Goffman (1990), too, observes the efforts required to maintain fronts in these worlds or spheres of interaction, and the particularly problematic situation that may occur when different worlds, spheres, contexts, collide. In this thesis, for these actors, their process of becoming self-employed involves them having to construct new frames, and shuffle the old ones, key the activities within them, and become students of the guided doings of those frames they are yet to fully step into. My presence in their frames, in which I take them to

be self-employed, lends a hand to the maintenance of their frames, and likewise, their acceptance of me as researcher, maintains my research frame. We assist each other in becoming masters of our multiple realities, and developing new identities (Kondo, 1990).

### **Time Frames**

Spatial frames present certain problems, particularly where primary frames do not support the presentation of self-employed self, or a businesslike “front” (Goffman, 1990). Temporal frames present similar problems and challenges for the self-employed actors in this thesis. They too influence our actions, and assist others in understanding our actions. We see people in context, against their background or ground (Zerubavel, 1981), identity is contingent upon this (duGay, 1996). “A ‘groundless’ figure or situation cannot be defined in any way which would make sense, and is, therefore, totally meaningless” (Zerubavel, 1981: 19). Freda is thus at odds with a client because she gets to the studio late; late for the client, not particularly late for her. She is concerned that she is defined not only by where she works, but by what hours, and that if these hours are not in some way traditionally accepted working hours, she will not be taken to be seriously “in business”. And I, on one of my first business trips, finding myself in the wrong street at the wrong time, am taken to be in a completely different sort of business, whilst actually looking for a taxi. The temporal context of evening, together with, unbeknown to me, that particular spatial context gave me the wrong “ground”. (The briefcase was obviously not a strong enough symbol to overcome this.) The usefulness of temporal cues however, is that in this complex world we may successfully co-ordinate our activities, and connect our multiple times (Adam, 1995 and Schutz, 1970, Zerubavel 1981). Thus the self employed actors in this study are able to say that being in control of their own time is

one of the benefits of self employment - they can child care if needs be for example. But they remark that in some respects they feel as if time is never their own, they are either at the beck and call of clients or constantly battling to get work done with never enough time to stop and relax. Angela and Freda cannot yet, and might never, manage to contain their productive time within the traditional nine to five work frame. The self-employed actors in this study almost all felt that they would become masters of their own time as feel the watchmakers in Strodbeck and Sussman's study (1965). But almost all have, early on in their self-employed career, experienced the ironic realization that self-employment is no more a route to mastery over time than any other activity or way of being is a route to freedom (Cohen and Taylor, 1992).

Such ordered use of time, measure of time and imputing of value onto time are not natural, but the actions of a social world. Angela's time lurched from entropy to watershed, it took several months for her to take some control of it. Zerubavel (1981) remarks upon the Benedictine invention of schedule, the motivation behind it to avoid "wasting" time. Such schedules produce a "... rhythmicity imposed on social life by the temporal spacing of numerous recurrent activities and events ... these are not only empirical patterns but actually normative prescriptions as well" (1981: 10). So normative that Alan found it incredibly difficult to break out from his old clocking in and clocking out time. So prescriptive that Angela didn't recognise the way in which she might adapt the time management course to suit her way of working, but bucked against it.

Schedules apply in both macro and micro contexts (Zerubavel, 1981), but it is in the micro contexts of self-employment that the "... entropic and the creative" (Adam, 1995: 17) are found, in what is usually "unobserved time",

that “time out” period in which we might say “nothing’s happening” (Becker, 1998). It is not really that nothing is happening, it may be that there is no – in this context *economic* - interaction taking place that we may clearly identify as self-employment work. These are the periods of time I remark upon in the data chapters as stretches of sameness, with a circularity of conversation and repetition doubtless prompted by my presence, necessary reflective processes, but not good for business if over-indulged in. The “human experience of time is always a process; the present is always a becoming” (Strauss, 1969: 31). As Angela puts it: *“I mean most of what we’ve talked about has been to do with periods of change.”* And reflection upon one’s epiphanies (Denzin, 1989), can set one up for the next phase of action (Shibutani, 1961).

### **Macro Time Frames**

If this is a heavily agent weighted analysis, it is useful to remember that in small business too, one may make one’s choices but not in the times/spaces of one’s own choosing: one might not be born into a location best suited to one’s life aims, “... some people come to an age of work when there is no work” (Hughes 1971: 124). The interaction of natural, primary and secondary frames mean that “...[w]omen’s working lives are fundamentally influenced by the composition of their family and their stage in the life course” (Arber and Gilbert, 1992:1). Hilary and Freda provide us with examples of this, in “... *trying to get the work done when the children have gone to bed*”, illustrating the rolling circular frames of macro and micro diameters; life cycle, waking and sleeping time, caring and working time and day and night time (Adam, 1990). And every self-employed actor may ultimately be conquered by these, if only because those they interact with remain within these time frames.

## Other Frames

I remarked, above, that careers work has no need of frames, or frame analysis to explain what it is that is going on within the work context or to understand processes of career. The focus is the work self, and the context which enables that self to become. Context, in the observation of careers, is important, crucial, but does not have to be an issue in itself. The work self is a located self, and is located in the work which, in effect, brings it into being, through rites of passage, inductions, promotions and the attribution of role name - or tags (Hughes, 1971: 338). It is not an unimportant self, "... man's work is one of the more important parts of his social identity, of his self, indeed, of his fate, in the one life he has to live ..." (ibid 339). Within the work location or sphere the guided doings are a variety of tasks, sub spheres and sub roles, a micro universe of interactions (Hughes 1971). The frames are relatively clear cut: different kinds of work have a relationship with other spheres or domains, particularly their audience, clients and customers who "... define the very wants which they serve" (Hughes, 1971: 424). Within the work context exists a situational knowledge (Geer, 1968), a knowledge that is quite elusive to the self-employed actor.

In the becoming phase of self-employment the situational knowledges (Geer, 1968) employed by the actors in this thesis are used to couch the custom and assistance of friends and family. Local networks of trade are tentatively developed, the "...messy, and often frustrating work of contact" (Poland, 1992: 188). This keeps them in a familiar frame of operation, and out of the bigger market places that they still dread interacting in: as Freda remarks "*...it's just coming across to somebody else about it that I find very difficult.*"



Situational knowledge (Geer, 1968), or that part of an actor's 'stock of knowledge' (Schutz, 1970) which is context relevant, is taken as 'adequate until further notice'"(Giddens, 1976: 29). Changing jobs or starting a business involves acquiring new situational knowledge to add to ones stocks of knowledge. And the measure of one's success in new frames, marked through validation and legitimation (Singer, 1980), is how well one's situational knowledge supports oneself. In the self-employed sphere the return of a customer for a second order would serve as a legitimation to the self-employed actor, or the successful acquisition of a contract, or even the pestering of an advertising agency. In my own self-employment, repeat contracts were always reassuring, and repeat orders from Freda's clients help her feel that she must be doing more or less the right thing. And because frames are fluid, "... continually being modified through interaction, as well as continually providing the context in which interaction occurs"(Lauer and Handel, 1977: 148), there are valuable opportunities to try to improve one's performances, as Alan realised.

Goffman's frames are practical; the activities within frames are identifiable, the guided doings in pre-existing frames readily established and subversions and *keyings* accessible to the observer. Macro frames – of self employment at least, are more abstract, throwing up contradictions and providing no guided doings. "Self-employment and small business formation have been promoted by the Conservative government as a means of stimulating enterprise. This has been viewed, on the one hand, as a contribution to economic development and regeneration of UK industry and, on the other, as a means of reducing dependence on the welfare state and diverting the unemployed into gainful economic activity" (Rainbird, 1991: 200). Such knowledge as this, which indeed acts to push

or pull actors into self-employment is hardly practical knowledge, but an ideological backdrop to the endeavours of the actors in this study. Rainbird notes “ ... it is insufficient to assume that the mere existence of small capital is indicative of an ability to extract surplus value and accumulate ... the majority of the self-employed earn a subsistence living only ...(ibid: 213-4). The implications to be drawn are that transferable skills, knowledges, and resources, may do little to assist the move into self employment, without the added difficulty presented by a lack of specific, situational knowledge - particularly lacking for women who have not had access to it in formal labour markets (Rees, 1992, Allen and Truman, 1992).

Most of the actors in this thesis are still far more comfortable in their familiar frames, and reluctant to emerge into bigger, colder frames. Freda is still stuck in the “bread and butter” products, Angela is still waiting for the “big one”, and Alan is still having difficulty thinking himself out of the treatment room. They are working, but still not yet readily and easily managing to *employ* themselves as economic actors doing entrepreneuring. Examining their temporal frames, a lack of regularity, frequency of interaction, rhythmicity - the very things many of these actors sought, or at least were not sorry to escape - means that they are not all, yet, building their own structures and routines to reinforce their temporal and spatial frames. They are in temporally liminal frames still, out of kilter with the working world, and not, (except for Patricia) filling their temporally chaotic frames with any reinforcing rhythms.

### **Looking Forwards**

Bill, Anthony, Barry and Fergus were not *pushed*, through un-employment or discriminating practices at work, into self-employment, but directed

themselves into it as a way of gaining more control, predictability and stability, hopefully, for their lives and income. Nevertheless, as both social and economic actors (Parsons and Smelser 1956, Smelser 1976, Granovetter and Swedberg, 1992, and Granovetter 1995), "...the decision to enter self-employment is a response to the conditions of the labour market rather than free choice" (Allen and Truman, 1992: 167).

Blumer, drawing our attention to the uniqueness of the human being feels we are equipped with sufficient tools for reflection to overcome such structural constraints: "... the process of self interaction puts the human being over against his world instead of merely in it, requires him to meet and handle his world through a defining process rather than merely responding to it ..."(Blumer, 1966: 536). This thesis treats actors as reflective agents, meeting and handling their world through their defining processes, but that doesn't negate Allen and Truman's point that some of these actors are doing so in circumstances not of their own choosing. Having discussed macro, micro, temporal and spatial frames and the difficulties self-employed actors experience within them, between them, and constructing them, we now turn to the difficulties these actors experience as employers of themselves. They are purposeful, reflective agents with more than one identity, and now they are both employers and employees.

The ordering of realities, for these actors, and the ability to take contextual knowledges and apply them to new situations is the application of a human adaptive and evolutionary trait (Runciman, 1998). It is a distinct advantage to the actors in this study; they are learning to order their realities – or frames – and they also will have to learn to shuffle and order their roles. This means letting go of their idealized intentions in favour of

the immediate and necessary practical activities of their new ways of working. Their new ways of working involve a process of negotiation, reconciliation and compromise. The pursuance of career and development of self as work self is a practical and structural operation (Becker and Geer, 1958). The self employed actors have to quickly become Jacks and Jill's of all trades, Freda getting her work space organised, Alan painting his treatment room, Angela working out prices for jobs that might never come off, Eric, changing tyres, servicing his cars, Anthony chasing unpaid invoices, Fiona dealing with picture framers. These tasks support the business, rather than the feeling that one is self-employed. New realities have to be negotiated with those other actors who make demands upon them, and indeed there is a degree of negotiation required between their many selves as they talk themselves into doing the mundane tasks of self-employment and leave the dreams on the shelves.

Chapter three is about a reconciliation with reality, coming to terms with the importance of work obligations, economic obligations and, rather than experiencing great freedoms at work, putting oneself at the disposal of one's clients. Thus compromises are being experienced by these actors whose work is not simply the development of a business, but the development of a work frame and a work self. Their new selves are constantly in question, the subject of reflection and self-appraisal. For many of them, indeed, "... questions may even be raised about the 'essential self', the self that I believe to be behind or underneath all my acts" (Strauss, 1969: 33). Freda questions whether or not she is doing her business properly, and Sonya questions the expectations the enterprise agency worker has for her. Fortunately, in their other, older, roles they remain confident. The work self may not really feel like an authentic self to

begin with, but will eventually become so if sufficiently used, so that socialization (Hughes, 1971) is successful.

That there are many selves may reflect an increase in available and possible roles (Goffman, 1990) observed particularly in an ever increasing specialization or division of labour in the work place (Geer, 1968). It is possible to be known only for one's work or specialism (Strauss, 1991), but perhaps increasingly less possible as more and more selves are split like flints from the rock, to the extent that "[p]roperly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him..."(Stryker, 1980: 23). In this study we know the actors in their self-employed context, but these contexts clearly overlap with others. The actors have an identity or self for me, in my presence and as I come to know them, and further selves for their many other interactions. Their self-employed self is their newest self, their most recent project, inevitably therefore a frail being which they are still learning how to recognise. They must flesh out and exercise this new self, bring it to the fore in their new and daily context, employ it. Identities "... may be thought of as ordered into a salience hierarchy, such that the higher the identity in that hierarchy the more likely that identity will be invoked in a given situation ..." (Stryker, 1980: 61). Freda, Angela, Edward, Sarah, Maurice and more are still at the stage where they prefer to invoke their more familiar, older, worn in, predictable and comfortable identities, although they are acutely aware that they must get these performances under their belts. As reflective agents, tentative and self appraising of their developing selves (Strauss, 1969), they are experiencing the tensions that "... arise where the newly acquired work identity fails to mesh with or to meet the specifications of other strongly held identities" (Becker and Carper, 1956: 289). They know what they should be doing, but they are not doing it yet.

Just as their frames do not pre-exist for them, for the self-employed actor starting out in business, the roles are not visibly available to emulate. Becoming into a career which has a visible way of being, in comparison to becoming into a career in which the doings are more obscured illustrates some of the differences between becoming employed and becoming self-employed. Becker and Carper note how much less easy it is for students of philosophy to identify with a clear career path, because "... they do not see their teachers at work and thus never learn in the detail that is crucial just what it is that a philosopher does and so do not come to identify themselves with any particular set of tasks" (1956: *ibid*). Similarly, the self-employed don't turn up at work to a set of tools, or a desk, telephone and computer, a full in tray and an empty out tray, or a cooker, a fridge and a set of ingredients and recipe book *unless* they themselves prepare their tasks for themselves. And it is the same for the PhD student; it is not possible to "shadow" another student, one sets out, full of romantic anthropological ideals to find oneself confronted only with one's self. Like the actors in this study, and in similarly hazy and sparsely peopled frames, I learn to employ myself, in my case, as researcher.

Geer (1968) notes that in careers which entail a training period, such as teaching, commitment to that career and a clarity of career path may begin during the training period. Commitment may entail going through a process of resistance and then compliance, and putting oneself on the line in terms of pride and self esteem as one starts to associate oneself with one's career. The actors coming into self-employment are undergoing periods of self doubt, and suffer from a lack of validation through interaction with others. At this early stage they are cautious, and some slip back into applying for jobs, especially when income is scarce and

enterprise grants running out. For many their commitment as providers in the household, even if only of a second income, conflicts with their commitment to hold out as self-employed. Goffman (1990) remarks on the oscillating process as medical students move in and out of sincerity and cynicism, and Hochschild (1983) notes how much of the very person is demanded by employers in the nineties. There is no more damning way to describe the surrender of self to a career than the way in which Wright Mills does: "Men are estranged from one another as each secretly tries to make an instrument of the other, and in time a full circle is made; one makes an instrument of himself, and is estranged from it also"(1970: 184). This is not what the actors envisaged, indeed for many it was the opposite - the preservation of self. They have resisted the control of employers and the economic controls of state benefits, the spatial controls of workplace and the temporal constraints of work time, they have chosen to be makers of their own destinies, but this will entail, in the end, making instruments of themselves.

What can ease this process is at least having others take them for what they purport themselves to be. Davis' (1968) analysis of the progress of self in becoming a nurse is helpful for our understanding of the social problem that the self-employed actors have in their becoming. If they can only be taken as credible by others it will increase their confidence in employing themselves. He notes that in the *doing on the way to being* stage, which he calls the role simulation stage, there are two parts: there is "... the self-conscious enactment of constructed performances whose legitimacy and efficacy are doubted or questioned by the actor himself"(1968: 246), regardless of their reception by others. Unlike teachers, students, corporate workers, for example, unfortunately the self-employed actor cannot inconspicuously work through their enactments.

And they will not meet in the same way those stages of denial, subversion and dissociation (Casey, 1995, du Gay, 1996 and Hochschild, 1993) which are possible when one is merely the employee. Davis remarks that if it were not for the unquestioning reception of the act by others (alters), the actor might never get over their self doubt.

In the end people do tend to take others' acts to be real and the consequences are that "... the sense of alienation from self which shrouds his beginning efforts – the first order discrepancy between his constructed performances and his conviction concerning their authenticity – grows less poignant with time as he learns that, despite his own misgivings, others can and do regard him as trustworthy, competent and legitimate; in short he is that status which his performances claim him to be"(Davis, 1968: 247).

In their process of becoming self-employed, the actors, like the nurses in Davis' study, are passing through the mirror (Davis, 1968) from private to public being. As they move; progress through their careers, their horizons and needs change (Maslow 1970). Their perspectives in a new job, or status, are no longer what they were. They are discovering that what was in some respects an escape, from dependence, unemployment, early retirement, employment, is merely a change to another way of working in which they are now both employer and employee (Cohen and Taylor, 1992). And they only have themselves, with all their discourses (Casey, 1995), between their preferred ways of working and those they are trying to escape from.

Even for those not becoming self-employed, complete immersion into a career is difficult, and unlikely, to be achieved, and would not, today, be



anticipated as a permanent state of being. People increasingly switch jobs, with varying degrees of ease. Some "... may slip into a new activity without thinking of it as an occupation ... In other cases they are apostles, full of enthusiasm and charisma, spreading the light of new knowledge and a new cause" (Hughes, 1964: 44). In this thesis the actors have in common relatively modest hopes and dreams, which are increasingly becoming bound in the realities of their existing selves. Angela doesn't want to be "fantastically rich", Freda is tentative about "going up-market", Alan too doesn't want to be rich, but their commitment to their way of working differs. For the older actors, it is a way of taking themselves more fruitfully into retirement. For the younger ones, especially those with families, self-employment provides the chance of an income, either the primary income for the household or the second income. The younger ones can't afford to fail; their new self must work. Their horizons, initially ambitious long ranging and wide, are becoming contained in their day to day struggles to become. Spatially and temporally, like the good days and bad days of Charmaz and Mitchell's (1997) actors managing ill health, the focus of concentration has for the moment reduced to here and now doings.

### **Working at identity**

The business frame in which they aim to operate is quite a different way of working and being, for all of the actors in this study. "[T]o define them as capitalist entrepreneurs [would be] misleading" (Rainbird, 1991: 214). They might be better described as, at best, "plodders" at this stage (MacDonald and Coffield, 1991). Their stocks of knowledge get them by but are inadequate for their new frame, which bears no resemblance as yet to the frame of small to medium sized enterprise. Their "... businesses tend to be smaller in scale and ambition, and suffer more difficulties from

the lack of resources and experience ...” (Hakim, 1988: 431). This observation is so not only for those entering self-employment from being unemployed, but applies equally well to, for example, Maurice, whose business bears no resemblance to the sort or work he was in before. Maurice is still bemused by the selling process, the sale or return arrangements he’s forced into to get his productions into the market place. The “habits of mind” (Bensman and Lilienfeld, 1973) he developed in an academic context are not working for him in his new frame, and he finds himself hovering timidly in the retail outlets he hopes will take his work, waiting for attention, rather than being the performer who demanded attention from his pupils simply by entering the room.

It might be easier for the actors in this study if they were able to draw their identity from their occupation. Few can, many are having to construct an identity for their product or service, before being able to think about an identity for themselves, other than “jack of all trades” for the moment. In theory work provides actors with a sense of identity and credibility, and others a way of knowing their position and purpose in society – it provides actors with a “mandate” (Hughes, 1971). But mandates are rooted in traditional occupations, developed over time; the interactions, embedding, negotiations for status and place in societal context have already taken place. Actors in mandated occupations already have “... a recognised place in the scheme of things” (Hughes, 1971: 293). Many of the occupations the self-employed are trying to bring into being in this thesis are new ways of working using new materials, new ideas and new technologies. Freda can easily say she’s a saddler, but her ideas for glitzy leatherwork still defy description. Patricia can easily call herself a writer, and Bill, a builder, but where some are carving out new niches there are

no traditions and histories from which to draw legitimacy, or a mandate to frame one's work.

What has helped some of the actors in their emergence to the public sphere of business and has also moved them from feeling they are only *doing* to feeling that they are *being*, is a change of name or the naming of the role that they do (Hughes, 1971, and Strauss, 1969). If "... new names mark passages to new self-images"(Strauss, 1969:17), the possibilities are opened up for an easier emergence . Alan has come to better separate out and define his frames and roles, by using a work name to produce a self image which is specific and differs from his other contexts (Shibutani, 1961). Thus a work name, business name or role name may work towards a successful becoming or carrying off, of the work performance. The actors in this study had underestimated the sheer amount of time and effort required to produce themselves as self-employed to a general public; Alan remarked "I've got to put on a really good act", and Freda spent considerable time and concentration on her leaflets. Whole days were spent on her presentation of her work, with consultations over the colour of paper and ink, and what artwork to use - partly the reason why nights had to be spent doing the productive work. Presentation work involved having to imagine seeing themselves as their potential clients would (Shibutani, 1961, Strauss, 1968, 1969), and this would be through language (Mead 1967); language, "... in the form of the vocal gesture, provid[ing] the mechanism for their emergence" (Mead 1967: xiv) into self-employment.

There was, in spite of the underestimation of presentation as a work task in its own right, an awareness of the importance of name and of presentation of self and of presentation of work. Furthermore this

awareness extended to an appreciation that a generalised other would form a perspective about them, that they could, with effort, influence. Alan went to great lengths to imagine how his work would be perceived and his marketing received and interpreted. Angela was particular about what she wore and gathered accoutrements to support her image, such as the mobile 'phone - she wanted to appear to be "in demand". Patricia obscured her gender. Freda wanted to be sure that the artwork and business name didn't too tightly define what she did, as she wanted to flexibly follow whatever market there might be for leather working. The actors were aware that their business name and marketing materials were in some cases the only way in which they would be known. None of them had high street shop fronts, indeed, for them, there is no such thing as passing trade; each client is a conquest. Freidson (1968) notes that it is incumbent upon the business person or entrepreneur or self employed worker to find their own market, as Geer (1968) puts it to "recruit" his clientele. "Since the expert will not be sought out unless others know of his existence he must establish some kind of visibility through a public identity"(Freidson, 1968:27-8). But, as Freidson further notes, it is a free market, so one must cultivate other strategies to maintain clients. This is not too difficult in a profession which already has a reputation in its own right, but one has to work cleverly to achieve that sort of status with many businesses. "So long as one must work with lay clientele, the very fact that it *is* lay clientele means that authority is problematic"(1968: 31) as Freda found when a client remarked with a snooty horror that her bridle repair was being hand, rather than machine, sewn. Freda relayed this to me with amusement and frustration, fancy her client treating her so snootily but not even knowing how superior hand sewing was over machine work! Freidson remarks that a desirable goal in business is to achieve such authority that one can choose one's clients. The achievement

of such a goal must surely be a status mark signifying that one's self-employment has a mandate, is legitimate, and one is, publicly, *keying* one's own frame.

Nevertheless, it seems one still has to fake it, even if one has made it. The license and mandate discussed by Hughes are taken up in another way by Goffman (1990). As license and mandate provide meaning, so they provide a particular impression of what an occupation is. Behind this impression the "real work" might go on, but the impression, the symbolism by which professions and occupations are understood must also be constructed and maintained, and this too is very real work. Goffman considers this work as a performance, and the performance of the symbolic message to outsiders, clients, customers or patients, as presenting a front. In Hughes (1971) work, the front presented has become " a 'collective representation', and a fact in its own right" (Goffman, 1990: 57). Both Hughes and Goffman are concerned with the construction of work, Hughes with the constellation of tasks and interactions which serve to develop the credibility of particular work, Goffman with the front which promotes credibility, as just as important as the tasks beneath this. He wryly notes that although actors may make their choices either "... due to a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front the actor will find that he must do both" (Goffman, 1990: 57). It is not sufficient for Sonya to be a curtain maker, she must be able to perform as such in the presence of clients. And although my male curtain fitter could don slippers and arm himself with a vacuum cleaner to enter clients houses, he could consciously key up his image, I couldn't because it would have keyed me back into a domestic image. At this stage of becoming, the actors are getting their teeth into presentation, but are still reluctant performers, and to varying

degrees resistant to the notion that this will not just be to get started, but will be a continuous component of their self-employment.

Alan, becoming increasingly conscious of the importance of presentation of self, and working at developing a relatively young sort of business, (private sports injury massage wouldn't have been heard of that many years ago) dons a white coat to look "clinical". "For the observer this is a wonderful, though sometimes disastrous, convenience. Instead of having to maintain a different pattern of expectation and responsive treatment for each slightly different performer and performance, he can place the situation in a broad category around which it is easy for him to mobilize his past experience and stereotypical thinking" (Goffman,1990:36). As soon as these actors emerge into the public domain they must act, and in such a manner that their performances are easily understood by everyone, any one of whom might be a potential customer. It is not sufficient only to *do*, they must convince others that they *are*, what they say they are. So coming to do self-employment and be self-employed, entails performing a number of tasks to both construct one's self-employed frame, and present oneself and one's work in an appropriate light. The performance of some of these tasks may be guided by one's doings in pre-existing frames, but often there is no template, one must simply proceed with care.

This is possible. "The essence of the self ... is cognitive: it lies in the internalized conversation of gestures which constitutes thinking, or in terms of which thought or reflection proceeds."(Mead, 1967: 173). The self-employed actors in their becoming, are reflective, careful, thoughtful about how they should proceed, and how best they should present themselves. And they are self critical. Angela remarks that part of her

problems have been because she was *“not thinking myself out of the house”*. And Alan: *“You have to work out how you would speak to everybody and what lines of conversation you would use ...”*.

The actors rehearse scenarios in their minds, Fiona pessimistically imagining that if she did portraits of people they wouldn't like them, and although she can paint, couldn't face the prospect of having a commission withdrawn. She avoids doing portraits, although the few she has done have been accepted. She has told herself she will not do them. It is risky to become self-employed, but in the careful attention these actors pay to themselves, they minimise risk to their new self by being careful not to place themselves in difficult frames. Goffman observes that “[t]he self that selects the ‘least threatening position’ or ‘footing’ in the interaction as it unfolds is the core motivational unit. It is a thread through all the various selves which are enacted, which can be exalted or threatened by the way performances are carried off” (Collins, 1988: 57). This seemed to be so with these actors, not only in their day to day care for their frail new becoming, but often in their conversations with me. They felt it necessary to explain themselves, validate inactivity, construct their credibility and produce a good account.

### **Reflections**

But usually we can move through our frames with “unreflective accommodation” (Cohen and Taylor, 1992: 47). And although “...[n]obody unreflectively accommodates to every aspect of life ... neither does anyone bring self consciousness to every area ...”(ibid: 55). It is the same for the way we act towards ourselves. The individual “... takes his personal identity so much for granted that he does not realise the extent to which his life is structured by the working conception he forms of

himself" (Shibutani, 1961: 215). So if " ... the current situation closely matches our past experience and if a desirable response is already clearly defined by that experience, we respond automatically to events without consciousness" (Lauer and Handel, 1977: 12).

These observations are of un-self-conscious behaviour in taken for granted frames, which is completely contrary to the careful and reflective actions, and in-actions, of the self-employed actors in their emergence as economic agents of enterprise. They find themselves in new situations about which they have no knowledge or experience. They find themselves, like Simmel's stranger, (Levine, 1971) taken beyond the boundaries they are familiar with, to a disembedded state requiring far more concentration. Giddens (1991) refers to this state as a state of ontological insecurity or existential anxiety, in which repetition and replication, the things that practical consciousness require are not present, so a discursive consciousness, a sort of "hello what's going on here consciousness" is utilised. This is not only a spatial or an interactional frame phenomenon. It is also a temporal one. The self-employed ontology does not have the rhythmic predictability of social time described by Zerubavel (1981). The actors in their becoming self-employed have to negotiate their own rhythms and find their own opportune times for actions. When half the street leave for work and school runs, they remain at the window, to begin their employer to employee "what do we do now?" scenario.

In this isolated frame they must direct their own actions. Their consciousness is more discursive than practical (Giddens 1991). Like Laing's (1960) characters, they are detached from the social realities, space frames and time frames of others. They fit the distinction Laing



draws between Shakespeare's characters and those of Kafka. "In Kafka ... he is without parents, home, wife, child, commitment, ... he has no connection ..." (1960: 41). For the self-employed actor, the frame should only temporarily be this empty. They employ themselves to fill it, if not with interactions between themselves and clients, then with the productive activities that generate their economic legitimacy. In the meantime, their "... over-riding sense of personal consistency and cohesiveness" (Laing, 1960: 43), is in question. Lacking a self-employed history, or mandate (Hughes, 1971), they require, but as yet get too few, of the validating interactions of others who will take them to be what they aspire to become.

It would be sensible to consider that in these isolated frames of becoming, the self employed actor is practicing an intentionality (Moustakas, 1994) towards their new way of being, and that, if they are readily falling back upon existing stocks of knowledge and prior experiences, this influences how they go about their becoming. I will assert below that they teach themselves to be self-employed, but prior to this want to consider that until they work at reflectively assessing their self-employment - which indeed they come to do - there are some beliefs that they bring with them to their new role which if not addressed work to undermine their best attempts at becoming. If they do employ the self least at risk in their new situation (Collins, 1988), as Freda does when she whips out motherhood rather than immediately price a job for a client, we may assume that they feel scared of the pricing task although this task is so necessary to the job. Indeed most, if not all actors mentioned this as problematic, and some discussed it at length. It may be that they have correct perceptions about the price of their work, but unconscious feelings of anxiety about attributing an economic value to it. Not having experienced self-

employment before, or a barter economy, but having previously been salaried (with a neat discrete little envelope appearing at end of the week or the month, and pay rises left to the union to sort out) they may lack positive experiences and therefore positive feelings about economic negotiations. “[I]n the bazaar, everything rests finally on a personal confrontation between intimate antagonists” (Geertz, 1992), but we simply are not used to a confrontational way of trading in Britain, and may shy away from face to face interchanges about money. The closest association has been a fear of being seen to be greedy, as the actors here see businessmen and entrepreneurs to be. Even for those who have no negative feelings about pricing their work and asking for money for it, there are no positive feelings. We might debate the consciousness or sub-consciousness of these feelings, (as noema or noesis) asking how within reach they are to be addressed (Moustakas, 1994). However what really matters is whether or not we consider them open to change, and how. Moustakas (ibid) asserts that adopting a reflexive attitude brings about an examination of erstwhile unconscious feelings, and once these are recognised they may be addressed. This, and a further strategy, also discussed by Davis (1968) and explored below involves coaching and coaxing oneself into being and doing. Both these strategies are employed by the actors in this study in their attempts to become, through day to day doings what they aspired to when first imagining themselves running their own businesses. So that in the end, “ ... when one perceives or imagines or judges something, shifts are bound to occur as one looks from a different frame of reference, mood or internal locus. When one looks with confidence, what one sees will be radically different than when one looks with doubt” (Moustakas, 1994: 71).

Shifting the self into an unfamiliar context thus requires more than the practical day to day consciousness which gets us by in our usual and familiar worlds. "Human behaviour consists of a succession of adjustments to continually evolving interpretations of situations. Consciousness is to be distinguished from mere perception; a man who is conscious of something is communicating, usually to himself ..." (Shibutani, 1961: 210). The actors in their becoming are their own guides for their doings. They learn as they go along, and more than that, teaching themselves, coaching and coaxing themselves as they progress. They use me as a sounding board for their lessons. Bill realised he had to learn how to handle customers who didn't know how to describe what they wanted, so he went to watch the process. Freda realised through reflecting upon her exchange with a client, and her anxiety over getting things done in time that she had to formalise work arrangements by creating orders in a book. She had thought she was the only one who had self doubts and got into a flap about things, until meeting others at a workshop who had been in the same position. Angela finally realised that she was distracting herself from work during the day, and thus working half the night, and resolved not to. She also realised how little confidence she had to "get out there"; *"If you work for someone ... you never get these doubts."* Brian too questioned whether he was doing things the right way, commenting that that was *"... the isolation bit"*. None of them at this stage could take many aspects of being and doing self-employment for granted.

Work environments " ...are not simply places where people of various occupations and professions come together and enact standard occupational roles, ... These locales constitute arenas where-in such roles are forged and developed (Bucher and Strauss, 1961: 333). The

self-employed in their work interact with themselves, and it is they, themselves, who confirm who they are expected to be, what they are expected to do, and they, who are the “alter” to their “me”. The actors in their becoming are sole traders, working alone for much of the day, seeing other people only rarely. This may be typical of sole traders, who, through choice perhaps, will always lack colleagues. The process of becoming, the “transition” (Hughes, 1971) can be even more solitary. In this process of transition, one is acting with discursive consciousness, taking extra care, in the anticipated presence of the expectations of one’s customers and clients.

“In the process of change from one role to another there are occasions when other people expect one to play the new role before one feels completely identified with it or competent to carry it out ... These and other positions between roles make of an individual what is called a marginal man” (Davis, 1968: 235). As the process of change produces “... the freeing of a man from customary expectations by travel and migration” (Hughes, 1971: 221), it seemingly produces a greater care and interest in one’s selves, by one’s selves.

In this research I found many of the actors increasingly showing such reflexive interest in themselves. Some were excited and pleased to be becoming self-employed, having chosen to liberate themselves from the binds of employment, but at the same time most were quite surprised and overcome at the prospect of acting in their new role; a new role in unfamiliar and largely unspecified contexts. If the interaction, the rhythmic frequency of contact and the opportunities for validation are not happening in their contexts, (and they are still so hesitant to make them happen) then they are in a double bind, finding themselves both isolated

and marginal. "Contrary to the American myth of autonomous man, ... interaction is crucial to the individuals well-being and to the maintenance of his or her attitudes and beliefs" (Lauer and Handel, 1977: 43) so they are frail in their roles and do express self doubt. "Human being is impossible in a closed sphere of quiescent interiority"(Berger and Luckmann, 1971:70), and many of the self-employed actors have been teetering on the edge of this impossibility. In the process of their becoming, they enjoy only sparse interactions with which to bolster their attitudes and beliefs - in themselves. Jenny attempted to seek out peers at a business group but "... *there was no-one there who did anything remotely like I did*", she remarked. Craig missed the interactions of younger staff at the place he had worked, Thomas had no-one to bounce ideas off, and Anthony missed talking to others to problem solve. Fiona felt out at place at the local art club, the nearest possible peer group for her, and felt that the professional equivalent was simply irrelevant for her sort of work. For the self employed, the only "happy families" (Pithouse, 1994), were their own kin. In their new work role they are at the moment, "marginal men".

In this respect it is quite ironic that the self-employed in this thesis don't see themselves as entrepreneurial. They are becoming into a position, attributed by Simmel to the entrepreneur, as the domain of the stranger. "In the whole history of economic activity the stranger makes his appearance as a trader, and the trader makes his as the stranger"(1971: 144), a device used in pantomime too. Simmel, contra Weber (1976) describes his trader as someone outside the community, not a landowner, and having no ties to place or means of production. So does Poland: "The idea of a culture of enterprise conjures up a population of free-floating, innovative sole traders and small businesses tirelessly launching new

goods into circulation in ever-new markets”(1992: 175). Her description is not entirely alien to that of the actors in this study, who insecurely feel their way into self employment and fall back upon their “ordinary knowledges” and ordinary networks when out of their depth. Angela stays in the house, Freda stays off the internet, Alan stays behind the hairdressing salon and Anthony in the spare bedroom. Sarah tidies her work away at the end of every day, and Timothy the clockmaker scoffs at his friend “the entrepreneur” who rushes round the country and for what? Briony and Hilary remain within the bounds of their child-care responsibilities and their husbands’ work takes precedence over their businesses. In their new roles they are making strangers of themselves.

This is not to imply that what the self employed in this study do is safe, tame, or timid. What they do is every bit as Hughes (1964, 1968, 1971) and Freidson (1968) describe the doings of a business person. There are very real risks involved in being in business, for example not getting paid for a job, having to pay compensation, losing one’s reputation and perhaps even damaging someone’s body or property (Hughes, 1964, Strodbeck and Sussman, 1965). Hughes observes correctly that clients and customers pay people to take their risks for them, and make their mistakes for them, as indeed I was paid to cut £100 per metre fabrics, Freda paid to repair £1,000 saddles and Timothy paid to repair priceless clocks. So the doing of entrepreneuring, if it is meeting the challenges Freidson suggests, and taking the risks noted by Hughes, is being done. Perhaps the taken for granted or commonsense view of entrepreneur as trader and stranger, Arthur Daley or even Anita Roddick is an unhelpful image now, especially as it is possible to be the unknown trader from one’s desktop today, or in Freda’s case, eventually perhaps, from her barn.

What this thesis has described is an isolated becoming which for some is a necessary rite of passage, rewarded with academic acclaim. The ethnographer or anthropologist must separate themselves to bring themselves and their work into being as a part of developing their craft and professional standing (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). There is an understanding that this must be so. There is no such prior understanding for the self-employed actors in this study. This thesis has described the process of becoming self-employed for twenty-eight actors, focusing particularly on four of them. The actors in this study have been turning themselves into economic actors in the sphere of small business. This is no easy feat, and yet in their humble becoming's they didn't consider themselves to be entrepreneurial – they didn't really like the word. They were simply individuals who had decided to take steps to control their own ways of being. This involved imagining alternatives to their current circumstances, and turning those imaginings into reality. This thesis is about the turning.

In this chapter I am saying that in the process of becoming self-employed, one experiences a passing through the mirror, but that that experience is more than the thickness of a mirror. As Davis (1968) notes, it is a contingent process. The process is a protracted affair, which entails the development of a new self (Stryker, 1980), and a new frame for this self (Goffman, 1975). This epiphany (Denzin, 1989), the successful development of a new and additional self in a new and additional frame, depends upon the actors employment of her or himself, upon the acceptance of familiar others of the new self, and the acceptance of new others - clients or customers especially (Freidson, 1968).

In this respect, the bringing of the self-employed actor into being is more than a reflexive and imaginative presentation of self (Goffman, 1990, Shibutani, 1961), it is more than faking it until you make it; faking it requires an audience, the self-employed actors' audience is not necessarily frequently, regularly or consistently present. It is, in addition to these, about applying the sort of heightened consciousness (Giddens 1991) a stranger might, in setting foot for the first time on new soil. It is about liberating oneself from the constraints of employment or unemployment, being *disconnected* in a work context (Laing, 1960). And so, it is about having to run after that new and liberated self, to employ it, enclose it, direct it and structure it.



## **Chapter Eight Methodology**

### **Locating the research in methodological traditions**

This research, which began in 1996, was supported by an Economic and Social Research Council Collaborative Case Studentship Award, and Nat West Bank. Nat West were particularly interested in a descriptive account of what it felt like to be starting off in business, written in such a way as to complement the traditional banking and business terminology. It was felt that staff had had enough of graphs and pie charts; an account which would capture their imagination might help them to better understand their clients. This suited my reasons for doing the research, I then had to cast around for a way in which to *tell the stories* (Wolf, 1992).

I needed to take a sympathetic approach, one that would explore the process of becoming from the inside (Wax, 1971), and would produce not only the actors' story, or the inside *story* for Nat West, but a valid academic story too. I found my favoured genre before I found my methods; although the research is contemporary, it has been inspired by a generation of research described by Denzin and Lincoln as the "golden age" of research. It is an age they locate as bounded by "Boys in White" (Becker et al, 1961) and "Grounded Theory" (Glazer and Strauss, 1967), so called due to a burgeoning of qualitative research and ethnographies coming from the Chicago School. This research took as its topics micro cultures in urban environments, and sought to interpretively understand them in their own as well as scientific terms. Important to this research genre were " ... constructions made by actors out of what they [took] into account..." (Blumer, 1966: 543).

What I found significant and captivating about this “golden age” research was that it not only showed that sociological inquiry did not have to purport to be scientific, but that it could tell a captivating story of people’s lives too. This approach presented a challenge to positivistic inquiry; producing insider accounts, daring to ask the question “why?”, and asserting the influence of the human hand, and mind, and standpoint in all science. This assertion has folded back into a challenge with which post “Golden Age” research has had to contend: If all science is mediated by human understanding, so is all interpretive inquiry. If understanding and interpretation are not value free but a product of our cultural and social construction, how may any account be valid (Hammersley, 1992). In this respect, Nat West or academia could insist that a “... thousand word description is no more valid a ‘picture of the person’ than a single score on a standardized test” (Gergen and Gergen, 2000: 1027).

But this is actually a welcome challenge, inviting as it does a frankness to our research methods, (Ellis, 2000 and Richardson, 2000) and an awareness that all we do is tell a story, but that stories matter. For them to be received as credible and valid, requires the researcher as researcher and writer to be open about one’s standpoint, both politically and epistemologically, reflexive in one’s position as researcher, and explicit about methods. This thesis aims to be open in this respect also, acknowledging the art of the Chicago School sociologists whilst appreciating that it is insufficient to claim that simply because one was there (Hammersley, 1992), as a qualitative researcher, ethnographer, overt or covert participant observer, that the data that one delivers is a privileged account of reality.

It is not sufficient, either, to refer to something one calls reality without explaining one's epistemological standpoint. I have asserted throughout this thesis that the actors are constructing their realities, their selves and their self-employment, but are not doing so entirely in circumstances of their own choosing. They are agents acting within a world of largely socially constructed structures, some of which may be insignificant to them whilst some may impinge greatly upon what they do. In attempting therefore, to represent the realities of the self-employed in this thesis, it was important to me to retain context (Silverman, 1994), as the site at which agency and structure meet. Hammersley (1992) calls this "subtle realism", the production of an account which aims to get close to representing reality without attempting to reproduce it. Part of my representation involved reproducing myself in the research context and in the writing, making explicit some of my realities and locating myself as a part of the research reality for the self-employed actors in the study.

Denzin's (1998) description of "interpretive interaction" research, reads almost as a prescription for this research. The focus of interpretive interaction is taken to be changing life experiences; the epiphanies (Denzin, 1989), in this case, of the self-employed actors. These are understood in terms of my own experiences as self-employed, and the stories of these actors weave backwards and forwards relating parts of their pasts to their presents and indeed future hopes and aspirations. The actors in interpretive interaction research are located in their wider historical contexts, and although their stories are told as their personal experiences, and for these self-employed actors particularly individual experiences, they are related back to historical, and in this case economic contexts, and some quite palpable structures.

*“The understandings that are put forth should engulf all that has been learned about the phenomenon ... The moral biases that organise the research should be made evident to the reader ... The competing models of truth and interpretation (rationality and emotionality) that operate in the subject’s situations should be revealed ... The stories that are presented to readers should be given in the language, feelings, emotions and actions of those studied” (Denzin 1998: 335-6).*

The prescription above is a template for the main tranche of data production in this thesis. Its production did work at valuing the “ ... socially constructed realities, local generalizations, interpretive resources, stocks of knowledge, intersubjectivity, practical reasoning, and ordinary talk” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998: 318), of the self-employed actors. Prior to this, semi structured interviews were used to explore in less depth but with a wider range of actors, what it was like to be developing one’s self-employment in the North East of England, in the 1990s. With the data produced from these a “ ... non-mathematical process of interpretation [was] carried out for the purpose of discovering concepts and relationships in raw data and then organizing these into a theoretically explanatory theme” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 11). In this case the theme, that the developmental process was difficult and there appeared to be less interaction going on than one would expect, I felt, was sufficient to promote the need for more, deeper, research. It is seen as one of the advantages in qualitative research, that sufficient flexibility may be designed into the research for a variety of different methods to be employed towards the same end (Denzin 1994, Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, and Richardson, 2000). Denzin (1994) describes the researcher making

use of many methods as a *bricoleur*. He remarks that working in this way “... we all know we are not working with standard-issue parts ...” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 1061). We work with what is available in our paradigm, when it is available, in available fields and deliver it to an available audience. In this thesis I made use of micro analytic methods, ethnographic methods, phenomenological tools including the researcher as a tool (Cassell, 1988, Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, and Van Manaan, 1979), and frame analysis (Goffman, 1975).

### **Micro Analysis**

The source of the original research problem, in this thesis, was my reflection upon my time as self-employed: How, in relative isolation, largely devoid of constructive interaction, did I ever produce my self-employment, yet I did. This produced my research questions: What kept me going? What keeps them going? “If the researcher is carefully listening to or observing the speech and actions of respondents, then analysis should lead him or her to discover the issues that are important or problematic in the respondent’s lives” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 38). Those issues are where the research should be. The issues, in this thesis, were about empty time, non-interaction time, silent places and spaces, unmeasured, un-timetabled time. They were identified as valid issues through preliminary research with semi-structured interviews and micro-analysis, so establishing a focus (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) for the phenomenological study, during which the question developed from “what keeps them going?” to “and what holds them back?”. Although the focus was broad; about emptiness and solitude to a great extent, it directed me away from, for example, an alternative focus on cashflow or undercapitalization, which are also problematic issues for the development of self-employment.

## Ethnography

*"It is our experience that some sort of participation usually becomes necessary as the researcher helps out with small chores (or larger ones), wants to learn more about a particular activity, or feels compelled to participate to meet the demands of reciprocity" (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 79).*

I took the ethnographic method to be (perhaps not as distastefully as the above passage seems to imply) throwing aside the clip-board, rolling up my sleeves and "getting in there". It is advocated for furthering one's understanding of (originally alien) cultures, through using oneself as research instrument, embarking on " ... a progression from ignorant stranger to wise scholar, treading a path through self-alienation to self-enlightenment"(Coffey, 1999: 21). Ethnography has turned upon it's own cultures and micro-cultures, in part to practice an empathetic understanding of our own microcosms, and in part in recognition that strangeness does not equate with distance (Geertz, 1984). This, like the new challenges to qualitative epistemologies, has brought its own challenges as "[e]strangement is both harder to achieve and possibly even more crucial in studies of the familiar and the mundane" (Coffey, 1999: 21). This is the double bind of ethnography; to achieve and assert that one has achieved a stranger's eye, and yet, to produce an authentic account, "... the study of action would have to be made from the position of the actor ... one would have to take the role of the actor and see his world from his standpoint" (Blumer, 1966: 542). One has to be sufficiently strange to one's field to produce what will pass as a valid account, sufficiently close to reveal the position of the actor and actor's meanings,

sufficiently like one's subjects to be able to "...place oneself at the heart of the enterprise" (Coffey, 1999: 23), and sufficiently academic not to "go native" (Hobbs 1988).

In this case I felt that a "rolling up my sleeves and getting in there" ethnography would be the most likely way in which to capture what was going on in the back spaces and times of self-employed actors. It works "... and is meaningful precisely because we have a physical and emotional presence in the field" (Coffey, 1999: 100). And I certainly did have to "... carve out a space for the physicality of [my] body" (Coffey, 1999: 73), in tiny rooms, and window ledges, using my eyes as well as listening to what people were saying (Silverman, 1994) and being sensitive to the feelings as well as the words of the actors.

### **Phenomenology**

But in this research I don't begin as a complete stranger to the field. It is hard to be very different. Furthermore, I was once self-employed. So my research is inevitably "insider research" (Roseneil, 1993). This doesn't mean that prior to entering the field I understood every nuance of what it was to be self-employed. My self-employed experience helped most of all in being able to identify anxieties relevant to the self-employed context, and understand the language of the domain (and its under-use in the field). It made it possible to weave in and out of individual cases and local employment strata, and from the present moment of back spaces to the ongoing narratives of the actors as self-employed and also as actors in their other realities to create an "interactive synthesis" (Huberman and Miles, 1998). Perhaps this reads as a sophisticated technique, but it works out in the field as wondering what the enterprise agency would think about where you have spent your morning, or what the self-

employed actors would make of the business club meeting you have just left. In this respect, in conveying meaning from field to audience when each are both, “[t]he aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994: 13).

The aim was to “... focus in depth on the experiences of a few individuals to explore ... their deeply held understandings of some facet of their lives” (Marshall and Rossman, 1999: 63). In this process also, “... heuristic research aims toward composite depictions that remain close to the individual stories rather than elucidating situational structural dynamics.”(Moustakas, 1994: 18-19).

In the field I used my experience of self-employment to understand some of the experiences of the self-employed, but the specific day to day activities were so different from my own, and indeed for each actor from each other, that it was possible to view naively what they were doing (Moustakas, 1994), without being tempted, or even able to practice on the spot interpretations. Moustakas describes the “next stage” of phenomenological research as phenomenological reduction, a process in which “... each experience is considered ... in and for itself”(ibid, 1994:34). A complete description of the phenomenon is given, from which “... we derive a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, the constituents that comprise the experience in consciousness, from the vantage point of an open self”(ibid, 1994: 34). In my work this translates into the taped then transcribed recordings of conversations with actors, and recordings of my thoughts and field notes. But they don’t, as I argue below, provide a complete description.



I cannot pretend to having achieved such a perfect phenomenology. If in a phenomenology "... nothing is omitted; every dimension or phase is granted equal attention and is included" (Moustakas, 1994: 78), description would be endless. Description *is* endless, layered with the preferences and perspectives of the researcher and researched (Hammersley 1992, Silverman 1994). In this research I tried to adopt a light-handed approach as researcher when it came to theorizing during the process of researching. However I recognize the limits of my descriptions as privileging my account amongst infinite possibilities, both in the selection of what constitutes the data chapters, and their organization. So the next process in this methodology, which Moustakas calls "Imaginative Variation", and from which, intuitively, a sense making "identifying synthesis" is found, is bound to be limited. So an adequacy only, at the level of meaning (Marsh, 1982), is possible. Nevertheless from this one can then get a "... *picture* of the conditions that precipitate an experience and connect with it" (Moustakas, 1994: 35 my italics).

One of the ways in which my account is privileged is that I make context important. The actors made less references to their environment, their home, workshop or locality than I did. Yes we talked about them and the problems and benefits that went with them, but I "talked up" context, and produced it as liminal to the more traditional world of work. Although they made references to everyone else leaving for work in the morning except them, I chose to draw the reader's attention to the poignancy of this. "Stressing the constitutive nature of consciousness and interaction", Schutz (1964) argued that the social sciences should focus on the ways that the life world - that is, the experiential world every person *takes for granted* - is produced and experienced *by members...*" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994: 263 their italics). I talked up their experience as well as

their words. To do this context and frame of life-world are included as constitutive of our understanding of the development of self-employment.

After all it is within their own life-worlds that we find “... *people meeting their conditions of life* ...” (Blumer, 1966: 543, his italics). Whilst discussing actors’ constructions of meanings, their interpretations of their life worlds, their methods, and their stocks of knowledge, I held in mind that these were in particular contexts, and that the tools they used were drawn from other spatial, social or temporal contexts to be redeployed in a new context. People’s accounts are situated; “[e]verything is situated in particular contexts” (Silverman, 1994: 201). To recognize this and work at putting frames to use in an interpretive analysis to make context explicit, is not to court a structural account, but to acknowledge - at least – small structures. Silverman, discussing Chicago School sociology remarks that “[u]sing their eyes as well as listening to what people were saying, these sociologists invariably located ‘consciousness’ in specific patterns of social organization ... experiences needed to be contexted ... by precise observation of the territorial organization” (1994: 199).

### **Frame Analysis**

I used Goffman’s (1975) frames to do this in two ways. Firstly, as my own construction, to put windows or boundaries around different realities and roles that the self-employed actor has to be alive to. Secondly, to note that actors juggle with and negotiate between frames, without ever calling them such. That they must do this, and that I use frames to describe this, is to assert that actors are conscious of their structural constraints even if these happen to be at a micro level (Collins, 1988).

Furthermore frame analysis could provide me with an immediate if not multi-perspectival "... definition of the situation" (Anderson et al 1985: 149). As a tool it can define what *is* the focus of inquiry, and what is *not*, for the researcher. Criticisms of Goffman's sociology suggest it promotes a "... morality of selfishness and egocentricity" (Anderson et al, 1985: 150), and so is partial and distorting, and is so idiosyncratic as to be non-replicable. Anderson et al's response is that Goffman's work looks only at behaviour, as a naturalist looks at the behaviour of animals, and in frame analysis and other works, he is looking at behaviour in context. But what goes on in Goffman's frames is conduct in the presence of others (Kendon, 1988), including the researcher and actors' other selves. This conduct is interaction made open to layers of interpretation. I found Goffman's frames useful for being able to take an interpretive approach to how actors were managing their becoming, which involved explaining that in their present they were referring back to previous skills, or (sometimes anxiously) referring to coterminous frames that they felt they should, but were not, paying attention to. For a topic which involves becoming and change, the frames were a useful way of showing that one takes one's old and other selves with one. I could do this, " ... avoiding complete relativism but showing multiple realities. The multiple nature of realities comes from the way frames can be built upon frames, while the whole is anchored because some frames are more fundamental than others" (Collins, 1988: 89).

Frame analysis was inevitable in searching for a mode of explanation which would stress "... that the human self is multiple and dependent upon the kinds and levels of situational activity that are happening at the time" (Collins, 1988: 63). In asserting that it is possible to use such a tool to frame interpretively the interactions of actors, and in a reflexively open

mode, I note that at all times of the fieldwork and data production, I was also moving in and out of frames, and keying actor's frames by my very presence. Frame analysis could also draw attention to the analogous ways of being for self-employment and research postgraduates; the reference making sense in both contexts (Geertz, 1984). The data produced, in its entirety defines the scope and limit of the research frame; the writing of it, a further, narrower frame.

### **Locating myself within a reflexive account.**

I have taken pains to be openly reflexive in all stages of the research, reflecting upon my position in the field, in managing the data, and in the writing of the chapters. To this end some selves are revealed to point up where I am coming from, in terms of the experiences and questions that led me to do this research, and I draw attention to myself as constructing the thesis and therefore my own account and those of the actors studied. But if one is working at producing truth, one has to consider what truth is, and I acknowledge that my truth in this thesis is only my construction of truth, and so that construction should be made transparent. In this respect I aim towards an "Ethnographic Ethic" (Altheide and Johnson, 1998) which seeks validity in research - in this case validity as reflexive accounting. I read reflexivity in research to be a sensitivity to the researcher effects on the field, data production, data interpretation and data presentation (Davies, 1999).

But there are degrees of reflexivity, from, on the one hand acknowledging one's critical stance and on the other, one's presence in and on the field. "In its most transparent guise, reflexivity expresses researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it"(Davies, 1999: 7). She remarks that a concern

with being reflexive is about being at pains to be objective, with the emphasis on *being at pains*, rather than on achieving objectivity. For her, a reflexive method involves having to acknowledge the weight of one's hand in the process of research, noting that one's footprints are left in the sand. Just being in some of the tiny rooms of the self-employed actors in this study, let alone speaking and hearing, gave the sense of one's unbearable heaviness of being as a researcher, it demanded description.

Anzul remarks that " ... often what we study shows itself in other slices of our lives ..." (1991: 202). The process of development of the research, and myself as ethnographic researcher paralleled the process of development of the self-employed actors in a number of respects. In this thesis I make sense of the process of becoming self-employed in terms of multiple selves and frames within which and between which certain new selves develop. I cannot pretend to a reflexive account without constructing myself as multiply selfed. I was the self in the field, the self as covert and overt researcher, the self as friend, the self as empathiser, (Reed-Danahay, 1997), I would add, the self as writer, mother, partner, student, and that in a text, or thesis, still all selves are not revealed. There are both constructed, and inevitably, natural limits to openness, whether or not one feels it necessary to develop a coherent self for readers. In adopting a reflexive account I do not discuss all of my selves (Reed-Danahay, 1997, and Reinharz, 1997). I discuss those which I hold relevant, and in this respect I join the other actors in the research as once self-employed. What is most important in this thesis is that I use my knowledge of self-employment and my understanding of the pressing issues around becoming self-employed to interpret what is going on *and what is not going on* for the actors in the study. My experience "...

*becomes important primarily in how it illuminates the culture under study.*" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 740 their italics).

Some specific parallels could be drawn between the process of becoming self-employed and slices of my life; the "doing the research" slices. I had to start to learn what one was supposed to *do* as a researcher, and in the company of actors in the field, in the library, at meetings, I had to learn what one was supposed to *be* as one. I had to begin to employ myself as a researcher, and present myself to others as such. "Ethnography exploits the capacity that any social actor possesses for learning new cultures ..." (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 8). I too was employing a discursive consciousness as I employed myself as researcher in the field. I developed an awareness of how I presented myself, dressing to mimic or complement the person I was spending time with, dressing "up" for business club meetings to blend in with the rest of the members. I managed well enough at the business club; the staff on the door would sign me in and complete a name badge for me before I reached their table, just as they did for other regulars. I would manage myself, looking interested and serious, not too curious, commenting into the tape recorder afterwards, not writing too much during the meeting. The boundaries between personal and professional were strictly maintained for those meetings, I never revealed that I picked Joe up from Scouts when I left their Tuesday evening meetings. I worked at being "... intellectually poised between 'familiarity' and 'strangeness'" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 100) aware that there was always scope to improve my own performances. However those boundaries could blur with Freda and the other self-employed actors. It was OK to sit in their spaces and talk about having to get more work in, or how difficult it was to work out prices on the spot, or how the kids had made you late, or how you had to leave

early to get home for them (Reinharz, 1997). We commiserated together over the never ending juggling act of having obligations to others that interfered with trying to be “professional” - my word not theirs. In these settings the balance between familiarity and strangeness wasn’t easy to maintain, I almost went native again (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983).

We - the self-employed actors and myself - had to manage our time similarly, having the same advantages and disadvantages. It was possible to multi-task if working from home, I could set dough to rise and the longer I was engrossed in reading and writing the better the bread would be. It wasn’t a problem being in for the gas meter to be read, or to take the car in for a service. But we also shared the same experience of liminal time, being on the edge of traditional times for work and rest. There were no boundaries to our work, we could pick it up and start again after children’s bedtimes. Lunch breaks or coffee times were not scheduled social times that punctuated work, it was easy for them not to occur at all. Managing deadlines was our own responsibility, prioritising and organising tasks, our own job.

It was some considerable time before I started to recognise how similar the experiences were. At first, the solitary tasks of note taking and record keeping were so punctuated with visits to spend time with the self - employed actors that I didn’t notice that my organization of my own work, setting up files, making space to work and negotiating time were parallel activities to theirs. It was only when I began to draw out themes from rereading the data that the organizational parallels became apparent. The parallel feelings of isolation began as soon as I started transcribing. This task is much slower than note taking. I chose to do it at home because the house was quieter than the university during the day. I began for the first

time to hear the voices of the actors, and myself, as a stranger would. Whilst with them I was friend to them, leaving critical listening for the transcribing and reading process. The process of transcribing and reading notes and transcripts separated me from them, I'd not so much imposed my own marginality (Adler and Adler, 1994) on myself, as put myself out of reach for the purpose of completing these tasks. It didn't matter that the university was close by, and the self-employed actors spread, geographically, all around me. I became, in my own process of becoming, my own rite of passage (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), as isolated as the self-employed actors were in their respective becomings (Hughes, 1971).

### **Autoethnography**

This discussion moves my writing towards an autoethnographic account, as I use my own experiences in the field, and out, to “... *bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions*” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 740). In this respect the writing becomes, briefly, an ethnographic memoir, or a romantic construction of self (Ellis and Bochner, 2000), although the project was, purposefully, a de-romanticising of self-employment.

The inclusion of the researcher's agenda -“... it is healthy medicine for researchers to make their preferences clear” (Huberman and Miles 1998:181) - is a way of alerting the reader to the lens being used. The intention behind the work, with the additional interpretive layer laid bare (Hammersley 1992, Silverman 1994), is to deliver up a process of development without glossing over the warts. I asked myself first, “was being self-employed really like that/that bad?” and then set out to see what others' experiences were like. But the thesis is not intended as an account of my own experience as a topic in its own right (Ellis and



Bochner, 2000). My standpoint is as someone who was self-employed, making the case that self-employment is not always about Capitalism with a capital C, but about strategies for bringing an income into one's household which entail a development of business and self which is a personal, iterative consciousness and a not to be taken for granted process. There may be aspects of this process which are experienced differently for women and men, but again women are written about with a small w, I am not writing as Woman with a capital W just because I happen to be female.

In spite of the parallels between self-employment and ethnographic research, and parallel experiences between my self-employment and the actors' experiences, this thesis does not qualify as a fully fledged autoethnography. The reflexive writing of the self into it is important to the understanding of others' lives. The self-employed actor explains how he came to be self-employed, tying his history to his present such that it is meaningful to him or her, and, in the research context, to me. It is important to us that "...the individual biography, in its several, successive, institutionally pre-defined phases, must be endowed with a meaning that makes the whole subjectively plausible"(Berger and Luckmann, 1971: 110). The actors construct their plausible lives for me, and I mine for the thesis, bringing my history with me as a situated actor (Hertz, 1997). An account of the processes involved in data production, interpretation, analysis and writing up, including a recognition of the construction of my own plausible route to doing the research, are there to produce an openly reflexive account (Davies, 1999).

## Research Design

I decided to conduct a qualitative rather than quantitative study of self employment based upon my knowledge of:

- a) my own self employment
- b) the nature of self-employment
- c) the scope of qualitative research.

I felt that my own experience of self-employment might limit a survey method, but help in obtaining deeper data from the field. Foreshadowed problems (which drove me to consider how the social construction of selves held out in isolation, and drove me to question the common-sense understanding of “entrepreneur”) had the potential to constrict the research rather than allow it to spread. I suspected that my prior experience would produce unbalanced hypotheses and limit pre-coded questions for a survey method. I also felt that this method would close down rather than open up further inquiry, and I wanted to retain flexibility and scope for change in the design (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993: 8). Furthermore, I was conscious that my memory of my own self-employment had constructed it as something that it might not be for others. I looked back on it (then) seeing myself largely alone either at my drawing board, or in empty houses, or in my workshop. My memory is selective, in the attic I still have the accounts, that construct an entirely different story of “busyness”.

Rather than take only my memories into the field, and risk coming back with only them, I attached a micro-analysis to the beginning of the research, which would either steer me off or move me on into the rest of the project. It did indeed move me on, but had the effect of throwing my

inquiry wide open. I had had it confirmed sufficiently, “it’s official, the self-employed actor sits alone all day and the only time the ‘phone rings it’s someone selling advertising”, but for the individual actors it was more complex than this. I now had many more questions. Qualitative topics tend to start off with a broad remit, and I aimed to keep this one broad and open for as long as possible. When it began to narrow down, it was inevitably contingent (Davies, 1999) on the preceding processes, the guiding questions and indeed the sampling discussed below.

Self-employment is not a race, and there are no temporally located milestones in it; indeed there are few formalised milestones at all. If I were to look at the achievements of self-employed actors at particular times, I might produce a wealth of data on the variety and difference between different self-employed enterprises, but explain little. In this study I felt that it was necessary to explore the informal activities rather than enumerate the formal ones, and flexibly follow variety (Adler and Adler, 1994, Marshall and Rossman, 1999), without fear of not finding typologies.

The initial research questions were based upon a number of hypotheses:

- a) That there is little interaction in the early stages of self-employment.
- b) Our identities are constructed through our interactions.
- c) To develop oneself as self-employed, one must interact with others as self-employed.
- d) This interaction, as self-employed is doing business.

These hypotheses were drawn from my experience as self-employed, the sociology culture in which I had been an undergraduate, and my

consciousness of "... external forces in the broader political, social and cultural climate" (Davies, 1999: 27).

Turning these hypotheses into questions, involved asking a series of descriptive questions to the self-employed actors I first met. I asked how long they had been self employed, what exactly they did, and who their contacts were, who they interacted with and how often. I also asked about what they perceived the benefits and drawbacks of self employment were for them, and what strengths and weaknesses they felt they brought to being self-employed. Issues around solitary states of interaction got translated into "so you're trying to tell me that they're lonely?" sorts of comments when I tried to produce questions closer to the hypotheses for the Enterprise Agencies.

Moving from initial interviews into the field and the ethnographic process, I decided not to re-frame the initial questions into ones I would actually ask. "A basic question drives the interpretive project in the human disciplines: How do men and women live and give meaning to their lives and capture these meanings in written, narrative and oral forms?" (Denzin, N. K. 1989: 10) That question became the guiding question for the in depth study of the second group of actors in the study.

My question to myself was, is it possible, in spending time with these actors, that I can identify what it is that maintains them as self-employed and maintains their self-employment? To satisfy this query, my task involved seeking answers for the following questions:

- a) What do the actors *do* to make themselves self-employed?
- b) What do the actors *say* to make themselves self-employed?
- c) What they say to me?

d) What they say to others?

e) How are they symbolically interacting with me, others, *and themselves*?

There were moments when listening to a tape I would hear an actor say something that would move my questions on. I'd been tending to focus on the present becoming of self-employment, until Patricia mentioned how easy she found it to manage the characters in her plays, because she had been a manager before. I'd been exploring the multiple selves and tensions between these and multiple realities and conflicting demands, but overlooked until that point, the stocks of knowledge one brings from past selves into present constructions. This led me to consider how much the actors drew upon past work experiences, and triggered a re-reading of the data and further exploration in the field to look at two concepts:

a) The replication of work experience/knowledges in a new context.

b) The temporal (rhythmic/clock time) replication of previous work experience.

Listening to what I had said to myself on tape, and what actors had said, I noticed that they often referred to what they had "said to themselves"; and they talked (to me) about talking to themselves. I started to probe my memory for instances when I had talked to myself whilst self-employed, (I could only remember silly instances like leaving a property after successfully getting the contract and shouting Yes! Yes! Yes! in the car on the way home). However, and especially with the medium of tape recorder at my disposal, what struck me more was that *I was talking myself through my research* in the same way that they talked to

themselves - with words of encouragement, reasoning things out, self directing talk "I really must do this today ... I must make a list ..."

The hardest thing about the field research was making myself feel, and appear, small. My presence with the actors doubled the population of the room. For a long time they wanted to entertain me, or rather me entertain them with barrages of questions. It took some time to *train them to be researched* (Marshall and Rossman, 1994), and to work towards being a regular enough feature not to cause whatever was happening to grind to a halt on my arrival (although, ironically the opposite seemed to be the case for some of them). They expected me to arrive with a clipboard and were rather nonplused when I didn't. According to Janesick qualitative research design is like choreography, linking art with lived experience, flexibly moving but retaining a centrality, a core to which the work returns. I had little faith that this was the case at the time, and certainly found it easier just to produce a clipboard than explain this concept (Janesick, 2000). To this end I turned the first meeting with Freda into an introductory session, and produced a clipboard next time to help her feel at ease. With Freda and the others, I taped "interviews" which turned into - very loosely - guided conversations, and these were as much about reassuring them that enough was happening for me to be "getting something".

The tape recorder turned out to be more useful than I could have anticipated. I attached a large microphone to it even though in itself it was very compact. As a result the tapes were very clear, and I felt sufficiently confident in this device not to reach for notepads and pens all the time. I used it in place of note taking when I was with actors, just letting it run and changing tapes every so often. The rest of the time the microphone was permanently jammed into the dashboard, so that I could off-load notes,

thoughts, observations, reflections, accounts about the day onto it, not just on leaving sites, but whenever I got into the car. All of these tapes were transcribed so my field notes received an extra layer of interpretation (Ellis, 2000).

The tape recorder had the advantage of not slowing down speech through writing, but I was concerned that my presence with actors was adding speed and momentum to their businesses. Running out to do photocopies, or discussing marketing strategies, fixing a bridle (although that probably slowed Freda right down) all produced a division of labour which is not representative of being self-employed and a sole trader. Very few of these actors had any intention of ever taking on responsibility for staff. My free labour, without concerns such as health and safety, tax, national insurance or holiday pay, could have given each business a bit more of a spin up than would have happened without me.

I was conscious of this most of all, when the actors started to anticipate my visits and had ready to hand a run down of everything that had happened in the preceding days. They were starting to become answerable to me rather than to themselves, and were also starting to select for themselves what they thought was relevant data for our interactions. They were all at different times a bit touchy, sensitive, and parallels between self-employment and doing a research degree aside, it was alright for me, I had my sample, they however, didn't, as yet, have sufficient customers.

I had no skillful techniques or tricks for steering actors away from this way of interacting with me. It coincided with my starting to think about leaving the field, so I began to distance myself a little by reducing the frequency

of contact with them, and starting to talk about having to return to the writing up at the university. I also discussed with them who else they might turn to for feedback, reassurance and practical advice. Gibb, (1989) remarks that a small business is not a one man band but that the sole trader has a team of experts outside the business, for example the bank manager and the accountant, all of whom perform different roles in supporting the business. I tried, during the process of withdrawing from the field to encourage actors to make use of available experts, and friends and family. Nevertheless, telephone contact with one actor lasted for a further twelve months, and another has only in the last year ceased telephoning me.

### **Nothing's Happening (Becker, 1998)/Sampling**

My settings sample for this research was actors' homes as / or places of work, although this extended to visits out with them on two occasions. Occasions sampling was day to day time with them. Documents sampling was of the materials the actors produced, and I looked at all that were available. These included business cards, advertisements, posters, price lists, their work itself, and their logs or records of clients and customers. Further documents were the information brochures produced by the city and county councils, TECs, Regional Development Agencies and Enterprise Agencies. I looked only at current publications from these sources, those publicly available, and so also available to the self-employed actors in the study.

Initially I sought my sample of newly self-employed actors from the local new business lists. I had hoped to find new businesses at the local business clubs, but only met two newly self-employed actors at them. They were predominantly peopled by bank managers, accountants.



solicitors and printers - all the kinds of services *required by* a new business, not *provided as* a new business. The business clubs were their hunting grounds. The lists covered three administrative regions; County Durham, Northumberland, and Sunderland. I opened the pages at random and started at the top of them making telephone calls. I kept a log of the large number of businesses that had already folded, and if I left a message and wasn't called back I didn't pursue a contact.

It was temporal sampling and spatial sampling. I telephoned home numbers, during the daytime, and from those calls put together my sample. I excluded retail premises as I suspected they wouldn't yield newly self-employed actors but would produce an entirely different piece of research less pertinent to the development of self-employment per se. "White Van Man" only appeared once, - those actors that may have fitted the description were those whose partners I spoke to. I made the assumption that if he was "out all day" or "far too busy" he wasn't finding development of self and self-employment slow and problematic, or that I'd missed that phase with him. I asked how recently people had become self-employed, although I had decided not to have a strict cut-off point, "recent", "small", "young", "early" being relative terms. I didn't sample for age or gender, or agreeability, although had actors and myself found each other disagreeable one or the other of us would have terminated the contact (Marshall and Rossman, 1994).

"A typical obstacle [Becker warns] to finding the odd case arises out of our belief that some situation is 'not interesting', contains nothing worth looking into, is dull, boring, and theoretically barren"(1998: 95). This was indeed something that terrified me, because, through my sampling, I was homing in on the times and places where self-employment was purported,

printed, advertised and listed to be, but was not happening sufficiently to make those self-employed actors unavailable to me. That my self-employed sample (to an extent) did nothing in the daytime, was as significant for this research as the dog that “...did nothing in the night-time”(Erickson and Nosanchuk,1992: 4) was for Sherlock Holmes. Becker remarks upon the pressure from social science to study “real problems”, and the difficulties in justifying studies of the mundane, about which it might be said that “nothing’s happening” (1998: 92). I was, on the surface, finding the mundane, and could only plod on and take some solace from the observation that it is still, politically, the role of the social scientist to reveal the less visible and vocal (Hammersley, 1992).

During this initial sampling I also met with Angela who was planning at that time to become self-employed. Further contacts were made through friends who knew about my research topic. I chose not to return to my original sample when deciding to dig deeper into the self-employment process. Firstly these actors were by now up and running or had folded, but secondly, I had already opened and then closed relationships with them. I felt it only fair, in intending in-depth field work to begin discussions with actors by explaining that I would be under their feet for some time. Although making it clear that they could at any time tell me they’d had enough of me, I wanted them to think about what they were letting themselves in for, before we progressed too far.

Developing relationships in the field required a smart jacket for the business club and some very warm clothes for Freda’s place. There are some things one can change and adapt and some things that one can’t (Davies, 1999, Hornsby-Smith, 1993). My voice sounds “posh” on the phone, and if I try to tone it down it strays into a Gloucestershire accent,

self select in or out of the research, and telephone contact is not helpful for establishing if this is the case. Furthermore, accents may be a symbolic representation of an outdated class structure, irrelevant as a concept in this research, where self-employment, is almost a class of its own (Goldthorpe, Llewellyn and Payne, 1987, Hakim, 1988). I learned that less was more quite quickly, over-enthusiasm with the business agencies backfired on two occasions. I learned to be vague about what exactly I was doing, or rather, to be vague about how vague, open and under-hypothesised the research was. Again, as in my self-employment, the car was a symbol which was either useful or potentially undermining. It was acceptable to park it at all the sites I went to visiting respondents (although it looked like a potential tow-away in Sarah's environment), but I parked it around the corner when I went to the business club.

### **How the research was done**

In the self-employed domain, the "gatekeepers" to new small businesses and self-employed actors are the enterprise agencies who offer advice, support and funding to get businesses started. As it is in theirs, and their protégés interest to promote new businesses as widely as possible, one would imagine a list of recent clients would be readily forthcoming. In the statutory sector this was not the case. My first encounter with an enterprise agency manager ended with him in stitches (of laughter), and me almost in tears. His expectations of research were that it involved surveys and hard edged data about turnover, client contact numbers and such. Exploring how actors felt about their new environment and role, and how they "generally got along on a day to day basis" were not his concern. He got them started, if they returned to state benefits at the end of the year it was not his concern. I had more success with regional development agencies, both statutory sector and private sector funded, and from here,

and the - private - business clubs, collected a comprehensive set of lists of new small businesses. From these lists I could contact self-employed actors directly, and wasn't dependent upon gatekeepers. After my first encounter with the enterprise agency manager, I felt I'd been talked to as someone who knew nothing at all about "the business world". Heeding the advice that the research act "... is a social act ... each and every setting is socially stratified" (Altheide and Johnson 1998: 295), I nevertheless dug out a suit for the next meeting, and made sure I'd mentioned having been VAT registered myself, within the first two minutes of conversation. This strategy got me into, and more importantly regularly back to, the business clubs thereafter. In contrast, I "dressed down" and never mentioned that my own business had been a success with the self-employed actors; just said enough for them to understand that I'd "been there".

It wasn't possible for my research to be covert (Hornsby-Smith, 1993), but of course I presented an entirely different self to different audiences, depending upon what I wanted from them. Hornsby-Smith (1993) asks if any knowledge is so important as to infringe upon personal liberty and Cassell asks "can one discover truth by means of falsehood? ... we can learn only one kind of 'truth' through participant observation based upon falsehood - and that is falsehood. A deceitful ethnographer can penetrate people's misinformation, evasions, fronts, can catch them out in their lies. But the researcher can do little more than that, for a very practical reason: in participant observation, we use ourselves as instrument" (1988: 91). I gained access through economies of truth rather than falsehood, blending in and acting up to achieve a likeness with the actors, not to deceive but to make the most of my multiple selves (Cassell, 1988).

In January 1997 I started seeking new contacts for the ethnographic part of the research. In February I met with three support agencies, two Enterprise Agencies and a Development Agency supporting new businesses. In March I found another Development Agency running courses for small businesses, so sat in on those (and it was to one of these I later accompanied Angela). By April of that year I had set up visits to Angela, Patricia, and Freda, and had already started visiting Alan. I alternated them so that I achieved one day a week with each (except Patricia who I saw about once a month) during term times - during school holidays I maintained contact by telephone. There was quite a degree of flexibility, so that for example, if Freda (with whom I spent nineteen days) had a particular task that needed doing and would take more than a day, I could come back the next day to complete it. Patricia's visits (eight of them) allowed this flexibility as I wouldn't see her every week - if she was in the process of writing, she didn't want to be talking. The duration of observations varied, usually within six hours at the most, or a morning visit. Alan (twenty seven visits, some all day some just mornings) liked to have the Monday slot, because he liked to review what he'd done the previous week to decide how his current week would work out. Freda didn't like me to turn up too early, she easily got flustered, but that suited me as she was over an hour's drive away. Angela (also twenty seven days), would take any time in the middle of the week, or at weekends, and was only twenty minutes drive away.

I started withdrawing from the field in December, alternating visits with telephone calls until February 1998. Phonecalls continued until the July, outgoing from me to Angela, Freda and Patricia, and with Angela continuing right through the writing up stage. Calls from Alan were incoming, seeking advice about marketing, or to tell me about a decision

he made or a strategy he was going to use. Leaving the field I left the door open (McCormack-Steinmetz, 1991), the actors themselves chose when to close it. I had amassed over sixteen hours worth of tapes of the initial interviews, already transcribed, and a further thirty of conversations in the field, and, in addition, fourteen hours worth of tapes of my notes on leaving the field, gathered whilst driving or sitting in laybys. I used the university department's transcribing machine, but it still took almost four months or more to get through. I transcribed fully, withholding judgements about what was and was not important. Some of the conversations were miserable and depressing, and listening to them (again but in a sense for the first time) was a grim and sobering experience.

The usual contexts for the visits were the homes or workplaces of the actors, So Freda and Alan were visited at their respective workplaces and Angela and Patricia at home. In Alan's and Patricia's settings we talked about work rather than either sharing tasks or me observing them working. In Alan's workplace it was possible to wait outside whilst he was seeing a client, I would hover in the background whilst the client was greeted and then disappear to the car to speak notes into the tape recorder, returning to see the client leave. Observations with Angela and Freda were quite different. Whatever they were doing I would do with them or do something complementary. At Angela's home that could mean walking to the shops with her and choosing lunch and something for the kids for tea, or watching daytime television. In her office it meant perching on a directors chair peering over her shoulder at the computer screen. At Freda's workshop it meant becoming acquainted with the staff in the stables who would come up for coffee, eyeing me curiously as I squatted on the floor trying to get mud off a New Zealand rug. They knew I was a researcher from the university, so what was I doing down there? Occasionally the

settings varied, so I accompanied Angela to a training course, and Alan to a health fair. Angela wouldn't let me come with her to visit the printers, she said she didn't feel confident enough to have someone watching her during her negotiations. Her forays out for work purposes were almost nil in any case, so I didn't push this. One of the terrifying parts of the research was discovering how little the actors interacted with clients, and how delicately their self-employed selves seemed to hang in the balance between being and not being. Having made my choices and developed these relationships, the businesses were not increasing their interactions, turnovers or markets at all. I suspected it was easier to talk to me than confront the pressing need to do something.

In the first few visits we usually began with the tape recorder on. It was a habit and had become expected. What I came to expect was that once that was out of the way the off the record "actually the problem is ..." began. After a couple of visits I made a bit of a play of turning it off or changing the tape and proceeding to ignore it, without making a move to leave, and eventually with Freda first, I stopped using it at all, making far more copious observations onto the tape myself, by nipping out to the car or on the way home. The tape recorder had been least useful for Freda, as the workshop was large and she tended to move about as we talked. But it was possible to spend more time with her more easily as there was always an activity going on that occupied hands but not minds. In Alan's presence, and Patricia's there was a more concentrated amount of talking, interspersed with examining advertising materials, or book jackets, or record keeping methods. I used 45 minute tapes and I kept a supply unwrapped so that I could change them quickly too. As the duration of time spent with actors increased - up to whole days - we'd carry on without the tape recorder, and I'd download observations on leaving.

Using the tape recorder wasn't any more ideal than notebooks, I suspect, if one is aiming to capture everything. However I could maintain eye contact, pick things up and look at them without having to put a notebook down, and download streams of thoughts and observations when I left, without having to sit down and write. The disadvantage was that I could load and load new tapes all day long and not get much conversation, or leave it off and suddenly in the middle of an activity an interesting conversation would start up and I'd not have it within reach, or we'd be the other side of the room. Sometimes I'd say "do you mind if we put the tape on?" and then I'd recap by paraphrasing what had been said and asking if that was correct. At other times I would write a key word on my hand and recount it all to tape on leaving the setting.

I conducted the interviews with the first wave of actors using the tape recorder for every one. No-one refused or was put off by the microphone, and it appeared to be soon forgotten. I used a prompt sheet for the first seventeen of these interviews, to explore a wide range of issues about being self-employed. The initial interviews varied in their success, sometimes yielding monosyllabic responses and often so much conversation that I didn't get through my prompt list. There were 27 questions, put together to cover everything I could think of that was relevant to confirming or disproving my initial ideas. I adhered to them as much as possible for the first seventeen interviews, thereafter however, I had the three key questions already answered on the telephone and could go straight into asking about the day to day life of the self-employed actor. The three key questions were whether they worked alone, how long they had been self-employed, and might I come to see them. The further seven interviews were conducted after I had found the four core actors in the study, partly to reassure myself over the issues that had emerged at the



start, and also so that I had begun relationships with a further cohort should any of the core actors wish to drop out. With the latter seven, I referred to my prompt sheet, but spent more time exploring what the nature of their work was, and what they did on a day to day basis. I also did this with Freda, Angela, Alan and Patricia, to establish how practical it would be for me to spend time with them. All save one of the interviews took place at the site of work or home of the actors. One actor insisted that he come to me rather than me to him, and we compromised by hiring a room at the business school - the easiest place for him to park.

Although the responses from initial interviews confirmed for me that there were some underlying difficulties about becoming self-employed that didn't match with accounts of entrepreneurs in a culture of enterprise, these actors were cautiously optimistic and gave quite "upbeat" responses, although they didn't tally with the very small number of contacts they seemed to make on a weekly basis to do their work. Suspicions that their development of their businesses was slow was borne out in the later interviews, in which day to day life hardly held any business interactions at all. This was further borne out with the core actors who, in my presence, couldn't hide the lack of interaction and the hesitancy to be proactive in making new contacts.

During the course of my time with the actors in this study, I learned how to sew leather, how to set up artwork onto a web page and what were good foods for arthritics. I learned that the grass is only greener on the other side if you're just visiting - it was fantastic to sit fiddling around with bits of leather all day, but not for Freda, who, although enjoying her work, had to

sell those bits of leather. I learned with some surprise how very frail the self-employed selves were of the actors in this study. And in learning this, not only did I realise that my own self-employment hadn't been such a bad experience after all, but I began to fully appreciate the frailty of the becoming self, self-employed or post-graduate.

### **Analysis**

The task of analysis began as soon as the research process began ( Ely, 1996, Huberman and Miles, 1998, Davies, 1999), but only became a formalised task after leaving the field. Whilst actually with the self-employed actors, it was only possible to sustain my role in their presence and be open to anything and everything that might happen or be talked about. Notes - in the form of talking to myself onto tape - followed contact sessions. "My thoughts" as I transcribed them and initially labelled them, were predominantly descriptive, but occasionally small and hesitant theorising close to the field, became part of the data to be coded up and made sense of later. This predominantly descriptive data "stays closest to the original data, yet still entails selectivity, organization and focus; that is, it does transform the data into a form of original analysis by presenting them in a theoretically determined format" (Davies, 1999: 194).

I approached the task of analysis as if I was dividing labour between multiple selves, using time to separate out the tasks. Huberman and Miles identify only three " ...sub-processes... data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification" (1998: 180). I would suggest that these processes are repeated several times and that the various stages cannot be skipped (McCormack Steinmetz, 1996). They are distinctly different tasks demanding different skills, from each other, and from those used in the field. This is something Davies notes, that leaving the field is also

about a physical and intellectual distancing (Davies 1999). The task of turning onto the data as a resource was significant in the distancing process (Cassell, 1988), a process I found very difficult and had not completed even when first drafts were submitted. Nevertheless with each reading of the data notes were made, coloured pens and stickers indexed themes and concepts, and a distillation began.

I treated everything as data, and all the data was sorted into three forms; transcriptions, in chronological order of every tape – that meant of conversations between me and actors, me discussing with myself forthcoming visits, or downloading my thoughts after leaving a site, or my thoughts about what I'd heard in a seminar, or even something I remembered about one of the actors that occurred to me whilst on the way to do the shopping. It was all grist to the mill. The second form of data was my diaries. They were simply chronologically arranged note books, the start date at the top of them and the end date underneath. I'm not very good at having a book for this and a book for that, so again, everything from notes about what to do next, meetings with my supervisor, drawings of what I thought frame analysis looked like and notes in lieu of the tape recorder (for example telephone conversations with actors) all went in there and became data (Marshall and Rossman 1994). The third form of data were leaflets from the business clubs, adverts from actors, their business cards, price lists and any other literature they produced, which included some of Patricia's books, and Alan's poems.

One of the characteristics of data collection is its disorganization, and the process of analysis is a process of organization (Davies 1999, Marshall and Rossman, 1994). It felt to me like laying it all out as several hundredweight of assorted stones, over a couple of acres, harrowing

everything flat, then slowly and systematically walking up and down the lines, gathering up the stones. My problem was that they were heavy, and so initially, I didn't carry them far enough away from the field.

The first walk up and down the field, or the first read all the way through the data, produced very little in the way of themes, but several concepts that I managed to gather into seventeen categories. It was my "... search among data ... for participants truths" (Marshall and Rossman, 1994). I was scared to jump too soon and start excluding things, so everything seemed important and their "truths" most of all. I was terrified of getting it wrong, of falling foul of Denzin's observation that a "... preoccupation with prior theory can stand in the way of the researcher's attempts to hear and listen to the interpretive theories that operate in the situations studied" (1998: 330). I wasn't sure what I was looking for, indeed I was trying not to look too hard, but to wait for things to jump out at me (McCormack-Steinmetz, 1996). I had to feel my way, in the "arty' and 'intuitive'" sense that Patton describes (1987: 154). This first "reduction ... done as a conceptual framework is chosen ..." (Huberman and Miles, 1998: 180), went something like this:

*I collect the stones, I lay them out, I look at them, I turn them around a bit, I make them into a picture. To do this I discard some, I put some in more prominent positions, I walk back to the fields and back to the stones, do they still relate to eachother?.*

Forshadowed problems around the issues of isolation – solitude in certain frames - assisted my coding, as did in vivo concepts such as "entrepreneur" "salesman" and "businessman" (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983, Strauss and Corbin, 1998). These

categories were gathered up after the transcribing process, and gave rise to the seventeen topics produced in the first sweep through all the data. These topics included “dreams”, “money”, “planning”, “multi-tasking”, “divisions of labour”, “learning from experience”, “getting organised”, “compromise” and “interdependence”. The practical aspects of coding this way could not be mechanistic (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), as a variety of phrases and words were used by different actors to signify “more or less” the same idea. The “more or less” required reading around the word or phrase so as not to overlook the context or misunderstand a meaning. The self-employed actors’ accounts quite often were “... particular kinds of accounts ... used - to justify specific activities, events, and states, or to excuse particular behaviour or circumstances. These could be explored for regularity and peculiarity” (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 105), yet at the same time I felt it important that their situated nature (Silverman, 1994) was maintained.

Moving back and forth from codes to data meant that even in holding myself at a descriptive level to begin with, I was in fact practicing an interpretive analysis as I worked to put cohesive themes together (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). For this reason also, and so that I could revisit my scribbles, sketches and diagrams, I chose not to use a computer programme. Re-reading my notes and diaries also helped remind myself of other influences whilst beginning the analysis stage. In one of them I had written up a conversation with a visiting post-graduate, which later moved me on to pay more attention to instances of compromise and what the self-employed actors said about this:

Student: *“... so you’re saying we can never know how to be successfully self-employed?”*

*Me: "Oh yes we can, I could write a rule book; do this, do that. But people wouldn't, they do what is a compromise, and fits with their life, they wouldn't single-mindedly follow the beginners guide to self-employment."*

The practical process of putting tags and labels on themes and concepts is merely "... condensing the bulk of our data sets into analyzable units by creating categories with and from our data" (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 26). It didn't actually set off fireworks for me. Furthermore, although coding is identified by Huberman and Miles (1998) as data reduction, it doesn't necessarily simplify data, rather it complicates it by adding additional analytic layers. It was some time before I began to sort out these layers, using codes as heuristic devices to decontextualise and recontextualise data, (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). The analytic procedure, which involves the - eventual - explicit relocation of the data in terms of the tools and traditions of one's discipline, could be indefinite, and progresses with each rereading and rewriting. In the end the theorising which put the data into an explanatory context (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), is incrementally based upon each prior distillation of data, and although further distanced from that data, is still located in the initial themes.

As I started to gather themes, they were still quite flat, until I started to think of the chapters as a whole, and that I should take the reader from the public perception of self-employment into the private lives of the self-employed, and show the self-employed actors attempting to do the reverse; moving from the private to the public sphere with their self-employment. My subheadings became "Biography" "Damn the Entrepreneur", "Time and Space", and "Just do it" the latter embracing the "interaction", "marketing/selling", "communication mediums" codes. From

the words, phrases, sentences that were participants truths, and from my observations, I was beginning to uncover the underlying problems and strategies that were, respectively, important and useful to the self-employed actors (Strauss and Corbin, 1994).

Patton remarks that the balance between description and analysis is a matter of focus, the purpose of analysis being to "... organise the description in a way that makes it manageable" (1987: 163). Huberman and Miles distinguish between them as two levels of understanding, descriptive and explanatory. I stayed at the descriptive level for as long as I could, in the end too long, wrapping my text around actors' own words and leaving explanation sparse, gathering it all into the theory chapter, which needed several more rounds of the reduction – display – conclusion drawing (Huberman and Miles, 1998). Denzin (1998), suggests that the writing can be thought of as an act of discovery. I would agree, and insert this process into the above model, suggesting that in the reduction process, an expansion occurs as this first layer of analysis is written, and that the discovery occurs when one inserts time, then reads what one has written afresh. Writing up "... deepens our analytic endeavour. Analytic ideas are tried out in the process of writing and representing." (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 109).

It was only when I read what I had written that my text revealed to me what I felt was significant, and my way of thinking about it. Although of course there is the danger that "... textual style... frequently subordinates lived experience and its interpretations ..." (Denzin, 1998: 330). The choices made about the writing in itself are analytic decisions too, as some concepts and themes are talked up and given more significance in the overall account (Atkinson, 1990). Context in terms of frames, multiple

realities and multiple selves became more significant as explanatory devices as I returned to my earliest question which was if the self-employed actors are not getting out there and doing it, and they're not, how are they bringing, (and keeping) themselves into being? Rewriting in these terms it suddenly began to make more sense, as a central category; that the self-employed were employing themselves - each employing a new self-employed self. This began to give the thesis at last some analytic power (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). As Williams remarks, "Sociological discoveries are not ... about the anticipated or unanticipated discovery of previously known facts; they are much more about the attribution of different significances to what is already known ..." (1988: 73).

### Writing Up

*"The problem of representation will not go away... On the one hand there is the concern for validity, or certainty in the text as a form of isomorphism and authenticity. On the other hand, there is the sure and certain knowledge that all texts are socially, historically, politically, and culturally located. We like the texts we write can never be transcendent"* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 1059).

*"The interactionist charge is to involve readers' imaginative participation with subjects and authors in the described experience"* (Charmaz, and Mitchell, 1997: 195)

As I began to sort out themes, the way in which the chapters should be written started to emerge. I wanted to keep my hand light, refraining from alternating data with interpretation all the way through. I had not thought about writing up, levels of analysis and levels of generality (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) beforehand, or indeed how my voice would sound on the



page, or whether I could sustain some sort of narrative flow. I had to decide what I was going to write for whom, and leave the report for Nat West to be done differently and at another time. Furthermore, the rewriting of the theory chapter and this chapter, has been to write to an academic audience and produce this writing as a rite of passage, whereas the predominant concerns in preceding chapters were about producing the opportunity for others such as potentially self-employed actors to see that it's not quite what it's cracked up to be. On leaving the field and throughout the analysis and writing, I was, until re-writing, failing to focus on an academic audience. Texts, as Coffey and Atkinson (1996) observe, don't exist in isolation, so if this is to be shelved amongst other theses, these latter chapters are required to speak to an academic audience.

I have attempted quite a transparent presentation of the lives of the self-employed in this study, and not one that has a heavy and judgemental hand grabbing at paragraphs all the way through it. Indeed I've been coached this way with a gentle "don't you think you should wait a bit", when I've been over eager to theorise! Such lighthandedness might, however, be construed as having tiptoed around the requirement to nail my colours to particular academic masts. Having had the opportunity to rewrite the last two chapters, I have had the opportunity to, at last and less timidly, write in the second of the two distinct temporalities that exist (Atkinson, 1990); the ethnography is over.

A different self writes from the self that explores the field. When even greater distance is required, the third person is employed. I included myself in the data chapters because "... the knowledge produced ... does not emanate from a single individual, but is shaped out of the interaction of two communicating people" (Mykhalovskiy 1997: 245) the actor and

myself. I reflected upon myself and my parallel experiences in the theory and methodology chapter (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996 and Hughes, 1971), because it was valid to say that experiences are not exclusive to one domain. This has meant that the majority of the thesis is written in the first person. Slipping occasionally into the third person has been about moving away from personal experience, editing out myself to avoid my work sounding self-indulgent (Mykhalovskiy, 1997) It has been a conscious move towards academic analysis, and sounding academic (Charmaz and Mitchell 1997); a move towards that silent authorship which "... comes to mark mature scholarship. The proper voice [being] ... no voice at all" (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997: 194). Perhaps, but having used my voice in the field, silencing it in the text would have undermined the openness of the entire project. Its inclusion, as insider, has, I feel, delivered more authenticity (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

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